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SLAVES OF THE RING;

OR,

BEFORE AND AFTER.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "WILDFLOWER,"

"UNDER THE SPELL,"

ETC., ETC.

"Le plus libre du monde est esclave à son tour."—THEOPHILE.

"Let none too hastily conclude that all goodness is lost, though it may for a time be clouded and overwhelmed."—RAMBLER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

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REGENT'S PARK.

BOOK I.

Rollingay Farm.

"What is he, for Heaven's sake? Can no man
Give him his true character?"

HEYWOOD.

"A rolling stone is ever bare of moss;
And to their cost, green years old proverbs cross."

AMBROSE PHILIPS.

SLAVES OF THE RING ;

OR,

BEFORE AND AFTER.

CHAPTER I.

“ WELSDON IN THE WOODS.”

I HAVE a story to tell. Neither a quiet, nor an untroubled, nor a short one. I have been a long while making up my mind to write this story, but lo ! the plunge is made, and I have enough perseverance, or dogged obstinacy, in my nature to fight through it. It is a record of some four years—a brief span to most of us—to me all the loves, joys, and sorrows of my life. A bold assertion, for I am only six-and-twenty, with hair ungrey, a heart subject to the usual palpitations, and an enemy or two still in the flesh to confront me.

Still I fancy my romance has vanished away, and that, in those four years referred to, I lived the life of most men. I made my best friends and my worst therein ; I saw the turning-point, for good or evil, of more lives than my own ; I fought a battle wherein I might have been stronger, and yet wherein I might have given up and died. But the battle is over, the wounds are healed, and I am sitting here a scarred warrior, to tell of the fight—of the friends on my side and against me—of what a grand dash at the enemy that last charge was—who fled and who were left behind on the field, quiet and still, with the white stars looking down upon them !

It is a story of four years, I reiterate, and it began in an old-fashioned, picturesque English village, which I will call Welsdon in the Woods. What Welsdon in the Woods resembles at the time in which my story commences, and what business I wanted there, will appear in the regular action of this

narrative, on the threshold of which I am not inclined to linger.

It was a June evening, close, dark, wet, and sultry, when I sat in the principal room of the principal inn of the village of Weldon in the Woods. A low-ceilinged, angular room, with two ugly mould candles trying to look cheerful under difficulties, and bringing into strong relief the rain-drops on the other side of the window panes, across which the landlady's daughter—barmaid, chambermaid, and waitress—had forgotten to draw the red curtains. However, this was an omission which I altered my mind about rectifying; drawing the window curtains shut me in with a dusty fly-catcher, two candles, a farmer's almanack, a visitor's book, fourteen different editions of Watts' Hymns, a Goldsmith's History of England, with all the royal heads painted blue by a juvenile amateur, and a tea-board; leaving the curtains undrawn, afforded me a view of the night, and the

night's landscape—a dark sky, a low hedge, dimly distinguishable, some trees, and a never-ending, hurrying, rattling descent of rain.

Still this was a relief to the room, which haunted and oppressed me. Had I not already got wet through in my journey from the railway station, in an open fly, to the Haycock Inn, I might have risked waking up the good folk at the Follingay Farm, by leaving the dreary shelter wherein I had dined and taken my ease. But the landlady's daughter had assured me that the "Follingay people" were dead to the world after nine, P.M., and that a dog of an extra degree of fierceness was turned loose, to prey upon intruders at that hour, and was only too glad to have a chance of a nibble.

And it was striking nine when I had finished my dinner at the "Haycock," and the rain was beating heavily against the glass, and the slippers of a Glumdalclitch.

were on my feet; and perhaps this gloomy shelter *was* better than attempting to finish my journey, after all.

I thought so when it was chiming half-past nine; and, when despairing of the room again, I was turning once more with a slight shiver to the window—from which I jumped away rather suddenly; for as my face pressed itself close to the glass, for a better view of the damp state of all sublunary things, I became aware of a second face—not a reflex of my own—as closely fixed to the exterior of the pane, and peering anxiously into the room.

I had recovered my composure, and was considering the matter, when the person who had startled me was ushered into my presence by the landlady's daughter.

“This is the best room we have, sir.”

“And this will do very nicely, my dear.”

The landlady's daughter took her departure in a rigid manner—it was not the flying compliments of her mother's guests

that were calculated to flatter her. And yet the new-comer, who had so familiarly addressed her, was a young and a handsome man, and wore a black moustache, which, by the way, was more of a novelty in 1856 than in the present year of grace.

"Did I frighten you?" he said, turning with a half laugh to me.

"You startled me for the moment—I am not easily frightened."

"I had been watching you for three minutes at least—thinking how very comfortable you looked there in the dry."

"The elements of comfort are few too."

"Perhaps you are particular, and expect too much from the requirements of a country inn?"

"Fortunately I am not used to inns."

"Unfortunately I am," he said, with a half-yawn.

He had disencumbered himself of a waterproof coat and leggings, and was now coolly using the top bar of the empty fire-grate

by way of extempore boot-jack. For one used to inns, he seemed strangely indifferent to the manners and customs thereof.

"I thought these boots would have stood anything," he soliloquized, holding them at arm's length, "but your part of the country has a shoemaker's interest at heart."

"This is not my part of the country," I remarked, quietly.

"Oh! I beg your pardon."

He touched the bell by the mantelpiece, and then subsided into a hard leathern chair, ironically christened "easy," and stretched two long legs to their fullest extent.

"A pair of slippers, if you please, and a glass of brandy and water."

"Yes, sir."

"I should like the waterproofs hung up, and the boots greased—not dried, Mary. And I shall require a bed here to-night."

"Yes, sir."

"Unless," he corrected, "you can assure me, on the honour of a pretty waitress, that

the good people at Follingay Farm keep late hours, and would be likely to receive a weary traveller?"

"They are early people, sir."

"Oh! very well. Oh!—and Mary, my dear."

"*Sir.*"

The young lady was emphatic, and essayed to "look down" the new-comer. The effort was a failure, although the intention was good; and the new-comer seemed somewhat elated at having embarrassed her.

"I gave a carpet-bag to a shock-headed clodhopper at the door; see he takes it to my room, please."

"Yes, sir."

"And you will not forget the boots and waterproof. I believe I intimated that the waterproof habiliments will *not* require greasing. Oh—and Mary, my dear."

"Well, sir," with a short, sharp snap, that told of Mary's patience waxing low.

"I think I will have the brandy in its

native condition, upon second consideration."

Exit Mary, with a half slam to the door.

"Nice people here. What I call a good house," remarked the stranger.

I had turned to the window during this colloquy, and become interested in the weather again. The stranger's manner was not a pleasant one, and I had not cared to be too close an observer of it. It had struck me that a well-ordered being would have proceeded at once to his room, or have refrained from annoying the waitress when his style of address was seen to be objectionable; and as I fancied that he was striving to afford me a little amusement in a quiet way, I had turned my back on the scene to evince my distaste.

My companion lounged in his chair, yawned, stretched his arms, and regarded me silently for some five minutes or more, during which period his slippers had been brought, and the liqueur glass of brandy

placed on the table before him. Whilst I studied the weather, he sat and studied the fit of my coat, or the cut of my back hair ; at all events, I was convinced that his eyes steadily took me in, and flinched not from their object.

He was the first to break silence.

"Take care you don't get another fright, sir," he said, with a sly irony that made me knit my brows a little.

"I will take care."

"There are some more vagabonds and outcasts about ; one black - muzzled thief looked suspiciously at my carpet bag as I came in. Heigho," with another yawn, "that must be a dreary look-out of yours."

"Shall I draw the curtains?"

"Not on my account, but—it is a trifle dull!"

Conscious of being bad company, and a little ashamed of my churlishness on so early an acquaintance, I drew the curtains across the window, and then sat down and faced my companion.

We took stock of each other again. Yes, he was a handsome man to many tastes, as olive-skinned and dark-eyed as a Spaniard. Six feet in height, of a good figure, and not more than five-and-twenty years of age, he was a man who could bear criticism or comparison. There was something of the gentleman in him, too, despite the acrid vein which he had already exhibited; despite even the dress of the wearer, which was of a faded fashionableness, and frayed in many places. In the midst of the carelessness, even slovenliness, of the man, one could detect, almost intuitively, a man habituated to a higher society than the best room of the "Haycock" was likely to afford. At least, this was my first impression. I set it down here in the time and place that it occurred to me.

"May I ask if you are making a tour of these parts?" he said, when I had assumed a more sociable position.

"No, I am here on business."

"You know little of the place, then?"

"Very little at present. I arrived here by the 8.40 train."

"You gained the start of me—that was my train.

"Indeed!"

"Singular that two promising young men should be steering for one point of the compass on the same day and at the same hour, and both with no thoughts of pleasure in their minds. Fate surely intended us to be more intimately acquainted, or it would not have brought us *face to face* so suddenly. You were the gentleman who hired the only fly in wait at the station, and left me to walk two miles and a half through a quagmire. Well, it suited my means, and curbed the extravagant fit that was on me. Do you smoke?"

"Occasionally. For company's sake."

"Then for company's sake favour me."

He drew forth a cigar-case and pushed it across the table towards me. I was in-

clined to regard the stranger in a more favourable light after this little act of friendliness — moreover, the cigar was a good one, and I had inherited my dear, dead German father's love for the weed. My companion *grew* upon me—he was sharp, possibly even curious, in his inquiries, but he seemed far from anxious to wrap his own actions in mystery—and before that evening closed, as the reader will see, I had learned a great deal of his antecedents.

“You were speaking of the Follingay Farm some time since,” said I; “may I ask if you are acquainted with the Gennys?”

“I hope to be,” was the reply; “I am about to study high-farming, or low-farming, or both, for four months or so. Just an insight into the mysteries of making money out of a few nine-acred fields.”

“A farm-pupil?” I said.

“N—no, that is too much hard work for a man who has scarcely made up his mind to a profession.”

"It is late in the day to be still unresolved."

"Say it is late in the day to be cut adrift from home-ties by a Spartan-souled father."

"Oh! I——"

"Don't apologize, my dear sir," said he hastily; "you have touched no tender point in my anatomy, and these sorts of things," with an easy wave of his hand, "happen every day. Possibly you spring from a quiet, even-tempered family, and a mutinous household is a mystery to you. Your father don't threaten to cut you off with a shilling, or turn you out of doors twice or thrice a-week, because you're no puppet to be led hither and thither as an unsympathizing mind may dictate. Well, the shilling came at last, and to the back of young hopeful banged the patrimonial wainscot—and 'behold me here'!"

"Your father and you will soon be on good terms again."

"How long wilt thou give us, O prophet?" he asked, melodramatically.

"Three or four weeks."

"It has already lasted three or four years," he answered with a laugh, neither harsh nor forced, but a pleasant and easy laugh, that certified to his enjoyment of my surprise.

I was startled.

"I was not aware that the family feud was of so long standing. I am sorry to hear of such a cruel difference existing between two so closely allied."

"Ah! you have a father cast in a different mould—he——"

"Pardon me—he is dead!"

"I see."

My companion hastened to change the topic.

"What do *you* know of the Follingay people?"

"Nothing."

"That's strange, too. You are bound to the Farm?"

"Yes."

"As farm-pupil?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is satisfactory to know one will not be entirely stranded," said he, "that there will be one civilized being to cling to in the midst of an ocean of 'roughs.' You intend to try farming in earnest?"

"Yes."

"A strange wish of yours."

"It was my father's wish that I should at least attempt farming."

"You come into money—or a farm, perhaps—at one-and-twenty?"

It was a shrewd guess. There was a little farm in the Vale of St. John, Cumberland, that awaited my coming and possibly my management—the last gift of a father who had been generous with his gifts all his life.

"I shall be the owner of a small farm at one-and-twenty."

"In six months time, I take it," said he, keenly studying my face.

"I am twenty-one next January."

"You are tall and strong for your age—but you will excuse me, you don't seem cut out for a farmer."

"I shall try and like the business."

"Try!—ah! then the heart joins not in the work?"

"I have said I follow a wish of my father's."

"You are a dutiful son. Surely your days will be long in the land, if there be any faith in bible promises."

"Do you doubt them?"

"I have not studied the matter," he said evasively—"it is a far-away study, and I remember half-a-dozen dutiful sons who died of consumption. Perhaps they were extra-dutiful, and so were made angels of."

I did not answer. The mocking vein was not pleasant to me at any time; from a man who mocked so bitterly it was more than usually objectionable.

"As we are likely to become better

acquainted, may I ask your name?" he said.

"Alfred Neider."

"Are you a German?"

"I am a German by birth, an Englishman by education."

"You've rather a hard German forehead, but I should not have thought you of foreign extraction; and I have known hosts of Germans too—of the first class in Berlin, and of no class at all in Leicester Square."

"My mother is an Englishwoman."

"Ah! that explains matters. And now to clear away a little more of the brushwood between us—my name is not Norval or Neider, but Thirsk. Pretty name, is it not?"

"It's a matter of taste. I don't like it."

He laughed.

"Spoken like a bluff burgomaster—but it's all I have left in the world, Neider, and you must not disparage it. An honest and

spotless appellative, which he that filches from me 'would leave me poor indeed!'"

"You will excuse me repeating your own phrase—but *you* don't seem cut out for a farmer, Mr. Thirsk."

"I hate the country—I always did!"

"But——"

"But I pay Mr. Genny forty pounds to be initiated into all farming mysteries—the last forty pounds I have in the world. Will you read me that riddle, Mr. Neider?"

"It is too deep for me."

"Perhaps my father has also a farm, to bequeath a poor devil in his will."

"You don't think the gulf between you too wide to bridge over, then?"

Mr. Thirsk's black eyebrows knit almost bravo-fashion over his eyes, and he paused with his small glass of brandy half-way to his lips.

It was a peculiar expression of countenance—dark and repelling—but it had van-

ished in an instant, and he was smiling and satiric again.

“Oh! I am an only son, and always ready to forgive. If only to spite my upstart country cousins, I would cry ‘Peccavi—father forgive me—cut the throat of the fattest calf you can find, and bury me, *a la Danae*, in gold flakes!’ My dear sir, I am not a malicious man; I am ready to forgive the whole world—for a consideration.”

“Easy principles of the ‘every-man-has-his-price’ order.”

“Or principles of a stagey order—or no principles at all. Do you make me out?”

“Upon my word, I have not attempted,” said I, laughing.

“Well, I’m not a mystery man, and I object extremely to a halo of mystery round me. I give you my character, fairly labelled—such as the world and a tight-fisted father has made me.”

I fancied that he looked very intently towards me, as if solicitous that his frankness

should impress me; but there was an affectation of ease in all he said and did, that suggested the idea of a deeper channel, in which moved a character very different to that which he had taken some pains to describe. He was over-frank that evening, or I was over-critical; I did not think then it mattered to me very much which was right. I knew that he was pleasant company, and that the last hour had sped almost imperceptibly away.

"What is the time?" he asked, as I looked at my watch.

"Eleven. I think I shall adjourn to my room."

"We shall have early hours enough forced on us at Follingay Farm. Another glass, Mr. Neider, to our better acquaintance?"

"As you will. But I fear we are keeping up the good people of the 'Haycock.'"

"That's considerate. By Jove!" with a hearty laugh, "that is the height of consi-

deration. Haven't they their price, as well as we have. Shan't we discover that in the bill of to-morrow? "

He rang the bell, and ordered two glasses of brandy, and—"the hot-water jug as before, Mary, my dear."

"That girl vastly amuses me," said he, as she retired with precipitation, after receiving the order; "she's a sensitive plant, who hates familiar addresses. And she takes such pains to show you how you have outraged her feelings, that you want to repeat the experiment, by way of diversion. A horribly demonstrative girl, reared on all these Watts's Hymns—ugh!"

The brandy and water brought, and "Mary, my dear," thanked for her attention—chiefly consisting in slamming the door, which Mr. Thirsk invariably opened after her—we composed ourselves again for a second discussion.

A discussion that was never commenced, for through the open door the landlady's

daughter was heard at high words in the tap-room across the passage.

"Hollo!" said Thirsk—"Miss Verjuice wreaking her venom in a new direction—where speaking her mind does not interfere so much with the profits of this glorious old inn. Do you mind studying country life from this distance?"

"Is it worth studying just now?"

"I don't know. Miss V. speaks in a rich falsetto, and I think intends a few of her cutting remarks for our ears. Hist!"

Mr. Thirsk was right, I was inclined to believe; for, as we sat silently smoking our cigars, certain portions of the young lady's "piece of mind" might have applied to us with equal precision.

"Hulking here at this time of night, and keeping people out of their beds, and—and drinking nothing. Why don't you go home and sleep, Ricksworth?"

"I—I object to the old woman!" responded a hoarse voice.

"But we want to shut up—we're burning candles and wasting time, and we've no customers after ten—never! You're no good to us here, and you're no good to yourself—you never were, for that matter."

"Right you are. But whose fault be that? Warn't the world allus agin me—damn it!—ain't it allus tried to floor me?"

"There, there, we know all about that. Get up now, Mr. Ricksworth, and go home."

"*Mr.* Ricksworth. Well, you are the politest young dam—dam—dam—sel that I've had the elegantest satisfication to meet, come last Follingay Fair. *Mr.* Ricksworth!"

"Are you going?"

"Now my darter Mercy is up at the great house, there's no comfort in going home to big bibles, and big bits of tongue—it ends in my temper spiling, and my

flooring the old woman with this ugly black fist of mine."

And crash came the fist aforesaid on a deal table, with a violence that made the shaky foundations of the "Haycock Inn" vibrate again. The landlady's daughter screamed, and evidently made for the door, at which she stood and told Mr. Ricksworth that he ought to be ashamed of himself, and that if he did not go home directly she should call the ostler to make him. She didn't want his custom—she had never wanted his custom—and the sooner he left Welsdon in the Woods the better for society in general—to all of which Mr. Ricksworth replied that he was waiting for the old woman. She'd fetch him—rely upon it, she'd be round to the "Haycock" to fetch him!

And before the dispute had ended, sure enough the old woman—a tall, angular old lady, in a clean cotton dress, an enormous straw bonnet, and a pair of pattens—came

clicking into the inn passage, and making for the tap-room door.

"Peter Ricksworth!" she cried, imperatively.

And a "There, didn't I tell you so!" recorded the satisfaction of a man whose words had come true to the letter.

"I said you were a-coming, my dear."

"I'd a-come a couple of hours ago, you guzzling vagabond, an' I hadn't a-been detained."

"Thankee, my dear—thankee!"

"I hope he hasn't a-been a-troubling you much, Miss Morton?"

"He's been a great trouble, as usual, Mrs. Ricksworth," was the pert reply.

"It's a lie!" was the uncourteous comment.

"There—come home with you!"

"And who's kept you, Sarah, from fetching me—and I a-waiting so long here by myself."

"Robin Genny."

"What! come to Welsdon?"

"Yes—come to Welsdon."

"Good Lord!—that's odd."

"What's odd, stupid?"

"Just as I ha' been thinking of him to-night over my pipe—the young scamp. Just as I——"

"Come on!"

Mr. Ricksworth was evidently jerked by the collar, and brought nearer the tap-room door. There was a scuffling of feet, and then Mrs. Ricksworth and her charge were in the passage, and passing the door of our room. My companion and I both looked instinctively towards the gentleman who had been such a trouble to lure homewards, and his vacant, restless gaze wandered to the room wherein we sat. To my astonishment, at least, he paused, and the look in his bloodshot eyes became more intent and eager.

"Hollo, young gentlemen, hollo!"

Neither of us replied. I looked towards

Thirsk, who was smoking complacently.

"I've seed you before, you know!" said Ricksworth, nodding towards him.

"Oh! have you? Good night."

He was a tall, thin man, whose frame had been powerful and muscular in its time—who had evidently been a giant of strength in his youth. He was not a pleasant object, standing there with his beard of a fortnight's growth, his tangled grey hair straggling over his forehead, from under a torn fur cap—his great hands, with their cords of veins swollen upon them, clutching the door-post.

"I've seed you at mischief. And I never forget faces, young gents—I never forget 'em, 'pon my soul!"

"Good night."

"Ricksworth, will you come on?" cried his wife, passionately; and whilst he was considering her suggestion, a well-aimed shot with a copy of Isaac Watts caught the door, and sent it flying towards the fingers

of the intruder, who quickly withdrew them, and suffered the door to bang to with only a few oaths at the proffered indignity.

Thirsk laughed at this abrupt conclusion to the interview, but made no comment concerning it. On the contrary, took up the Visitors' Book, and began to skim its contents. I was in no mood to break the silence, and having finished my cigar, felt, after my long journey, prepared for my room.

After a few moments' consideration, I rose and rang the bell, to apprise the waitress of my intentions, and Thirsk watched me over the leaves of the volume in his hands.

"Off?" he said, at last.

"Yes—I am tired."

"Well, good night to you. Don't be alarmed at my restless spirit wandering upstairs at a late hour. 'Macbeth doth murder sleep,' you know."

"You don't proceed to your room yet?"

"No. I have a letter or two to write.

Oh! the host of friends left behind who are waiting anxiously to hear of my safe arrival! Mary, my dear," to the young lady who appeared at this juncture, "you may retire to your slumbers in peace—I shall require no more food or drink to-night. Leave me my chamber candlestick, and let me know the number of my room."

"My mother would prefer all the lights out below, sir—you can write in your room, of course."

"Thank you," said he; "may I borrow the Visitors' Book till the morning—if I have time I will write you my best recommendation—and the inkstand, and a volume of dear old eloquent Isaac here? Thank you, my dear, thank you."

With the articles he had enumerated gathered together in his arms, he gave me a half-comical, half-sinister glance, and prepared to shuffle in his slippers up the stairs. At the door of my room he stretched out his hand impetuously towards me, and

bade me good night, thus very clumsily letting the inkstand topple over on to the strip of landing carpet.

"Confound it, that was foolish!—on these beautiful druggets, too. Well, good night, Neider—the blessing of an honest man keep your slumbers hallowed from danger—and fleas! Can I have another inkstand, my dear—or is there enough ink left in this unfortunate fallen one?"

"It's broken, sir—and you know it!" said the girl, indignantly.

"No matter, no matter—I have one in my carpet bag. Good night, Mr. Neider. Mary, my dear, good night to you."

He passed into the adjoining room and locked the door, and I could but imitate his example, leaving the landlady's daughter scrubbing at the stair-carpet. The walls were thin between me and my future companion, and I could hear him laughing heartily in his own room—and a

very hollow unpleasant laugh it sounded at that hour of the night.

Long after I was in my bed, I could hear him walking about his room like one possessed with the curse of unrest; and when I had been asleep some hours at least, he woke me again by a snatch of a song that seemed humming close to my ears.

I rapped at the wall with my knuckles, and he responded—

“Hollo there!—aren’t you well?”

“Yes, and trying to sleep, if you’ll allow me.”

“All right, my good fellow! I say?”

“What is it?” I cried, angrily.

“It’s turned out a lovely night—or morning. It’s worth rising and looking at the moon. There’s the eaves of Follingay Farm white as silver amongst the poplars.”

“Ah!” was my phlegmatic response; “good night, and don’t make more row than you can help.”

“Good night—God bless you!”

And that was all I heard of this young gentleman for one night—and more than I had wished to hear.

CHAPTER II.

FARM PUPILS.

LATE as Mr. Thirsk had retired to rest, he was up and out before me the next morning. Mr. Thirsk would be back again in half an hour, I was informed; and as that seemed a hint to wait breakfast for him, I put on my hat and went out of the front door of the Haycock Inn.

It was a fine, bright morning. Last night's rain appeared to have cleared up matters, and brought the genial summer back; Welsdon in the Woods lay a fair landscape before me in the sunshine.

A peaceful retreat from the world's

bustle, I thought it, as I strolled leisurely up the rising ground to the left of the inn ; where a man, tired of the feverish strife amidst crowds, might pitch his tent and take comfort from inaction. No sweep of mountain and dale, or rush of waterfall, as in the dear old Cumberland, where my mother waited my return, but just sufficient of rising ground to vary the landscape here and there ; a sprinkling of thatched cottages, a winding road, a rippling brook, a picturesque wooden bridge for lazy anglers, a glorious background of forest land, shutting all in—deep, dark and sombre—part of the wooded estate of Sir Richard Freemantle, Baronet.

I enjoyed my walk that morning ; I even extended it beyond its just limits, and reached the Haycock Inn five minutes past the half-hour mentioned by my companion of the preceding night. He had not returned, however, and as I did not feel inclined to delay any longer my breakfast, I

ordered it forthwith, and took up my position at the window whilst it was being prepared.

On the window-sill I observed the Visitors' Book which Thirsk had taken to his room the night before. For the want of a better volume, I opened it and endeavoured to wile away the few minutes before breakfast by its medley of contents.

And a strange compound of wretched doggerel, and glowing compliments, and weak wit, the book was composed of, wherein the majority of visitors to the Haycock Inn had scrawled their sentiments in turn for the last nine years. I naturally turned to the last page for the maxims and opinions of Mr. Thirsk, and was rewarded for my search by finding a full-length pen-and-ink sketch of the landlady's daughter, under which was written, in a clear, bold hand, "The Fair Maid of the 'Haycock.'" Not that he had drawn the young lady with any great degree of personal charms, but, on

the contrary, had taken no small pains to caricature her, and had somewhat cleverly parodied the forbidding frown with which she had favoured him more than once yesterday-night.

Mr. Thirsk had evidently fallen into thought after the completion of his sketch, and dallied idly with his pen, and scratched a host of names, places, and dates on the opposite page. More than once my own name figured there, once in German text, in a blaze of dashing flourishes. He appeared to have been striving to recollect all the names that he had heard yesterday, for there were a little row of them numbered in this order—

1. *Matthew Genny.*
2. *Robin Genny.*
3. *Peter Ricksworth.*
4. *Mercy Ricksworth.*
5. *Alfred Neider.*
6. *Nicholas Thirsk.*

There had been a seventh name, which

had been carefully scratched out with a penknife.

I had turned to the earlier pages of the Visitors' Book, when two figures stopped by the window and shook hands. Looking up, I recognized Thirsk and a hairy-faced, round-shouldered young man, in a cut-away Tweed coat. Both young men's habiliments looked far from new in the bright sunshine; seedy and rickety men-about-town they might have both fittingly represented just then.

"You won't come in, then?" I heard Thirsk say.

"No, Nick, my boy, not now."

"Well, we shall meet again."

"All right."

"All right, Robin Adair, be it."

The men parted, and Thirsk came into the house.

"Good morning to you, Alfred Neider, of the Vale of St. John," said he, shaking hands. "I have been paying a morning

visit to my good friends in the neighbourhood."

"I thought you were a stranger here?"

"Exactly, but my friends seem to scent me out in a remarkable manner. Here's Robin Genny, a regular old London bird, hopping about here and snuffing the country air. Not that he has come after me, but after his sweetheart. You know Robin Genny, I suppose?"

"I really have not the pleasure."

"Genny the author, newspaper man, theatrical critic, essayist, and special reporter. A man who has seen life, and earned lots of money in his time. As clever a fellow as ever worked his brains dry, without making a name beyond his own circle. One of the best of fellows, with an unpleasant habit of borrowing half-crowns."

"Is he any relation to our farmer?"

"Nephew. He was the gentleman who recommended me to try high-farming, and

thought I should be sure to succeed therein.
Have you rung for breakfast ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And admired my sketch of the Maid of
the Inn ? ”

“ You are rather severe on that damsel.”

“ Well, I forgive her her trespasses
against me ; I am an easy fellow, and bear
no malice. I believe I said so last night,
Neider ? ”

“ Something to that effect.”

When the breakfast was brought in,
and Thirsk had allowed the landlady's
daughter to retire without comment, he
said—

“ This is the beginning of a new life for
you and me. How will it end ? ”

“ Fortunately, I hope.”

“ ‘ Life's a mystery,’ says the philosopher.
‘ Life's a merry-go-round,’ says the wise man,
who cares not for the morrow. I'm of the
wise order.”

“ Well ? ”

"I'll give no thought to the morrow—I'll live and wax fat, and let schemers go by me. And yet I ought to be a miserable man."

"Why?"

"There's no future before me! You can sit down content with the knowledge that money awaits you: I'm a poor beggar, whose chances have gone! My father disowned me, and said I should never be worth a shilling. Isn't that taunt sufficient to make a man play a desperate game?"

"I don't exactly understand."

"You're a dull fellow—there's German blood in you."

And he set to work at his breakfast in somewhat of a petulant manner. His early rising had not given him an appetite, however, for after a time he pushed his plate away, and contented himself with observing me.

"You're a fair trencherman," he remarked.

"Very fair, generally."

"Nothing on your mind to rob you of an appetite?"

"Oh! no."

"Never unsettled—feeling a desire to be 'everything by turns, and nothing long'—troubled with the angels."

"Eh?"

"Troubled with the angels—don't I speak plain enough?"

"Good or bad ones?"

"Well, the odds in favour of the latter, all whispering in your ear and tugging at the thing called a heart, and skirmishing incessantly with the weaker cherubs that once sat up aloft, but are now going down, down, down! What a different man I might have been, if——"

I looked up as he paused.

"—If I hadn't been a fool; or if I had been an arrant knave, and a hypocrite. I wonder how much longer you intend to stay in this cursed old inn?"

"I am ready."

I had scarcely spoken when a little wiry old man on a wiry nag came trotting up to the front door.

"Be there any gentlemen here?" he asked.

"Yes—two."

"For the Farm?"

"I believe so."

"I'll speak to 'em, if you please."

"Hollo!—what is it?"

And Nicholas Thirsk had thrown up the window, and was leaning out.

The man brought his nag level with him.

"Be you the young gentlemen expected last night, sir?"

"Yes, we *be*," said Thirsk.

"Measter thought as something moight be wrong like."

"What's your name?" asked Thirsk, abruptly.

"Ipps."

"Thirsty morning, isn't it?"

"Ay, ay."

And Ipps grinned, and two little grey eyes in his head twinkled shrewdly.

"Tell them to score up a pint of ale to my account, old soldier."

"Thankee, sir. I was told to ask if there be any luggage to fetch from the station, as the cart's going up this arternoon."

"There's a fishing-rod and a four-post bedstead of mine," said Thirsk.

"I can harness the nag to the bedstead, sir," was Ipps's quick answer.

"Who cut your hair?" inquired Thirsk.

"I has it done when the chaff-cutter's at work, sir."

"You're a knowing blade for the country, old man," said Thirsk; "get your ale, and then ask the landlady for a carpet-bag of mine."

"Yes, sir."

"And tell Mr. Genny there is some luggage of mine at the station," I cried.

"Happy fellow," said Thirsk, turning round with a sneer.

Mr. Ipps rode back to the front entrance, and was standing there by the side of his nag when Thirsk and I were ready for departure.

"Is this all, sir?" asked Ipps, weighing a small carpet-bag of Thirsk's in his hand.

"Yes. Isn't it heavy enough for you?"

"Oh! yes, if it be for you, sir."

Thirsk looked at the man, but his face wore quite a stolid expression, as he poised the carpet-bag in his hand.

"Tell Mr. Genny we have started. Tell him we are two of the most promising farm pupils he has ever had at Follingay, Ipps."

"All right, sir."

Ipps was an old man, but he vaulted into his saddle with the agility of a young one.

"You're a lively specimen," said Thirsk;
"how old are you?"

"Eighty-three, sir."

"Get out!"

"Eighty-three, come Follingay Fair next, sir. I doan't ask you to believe it, if you bean't inclined."

"Well, I won't."

"Thankee, sir. Good day."

And Ips, looking a trifle nettled at Thirsk's rejoinder, gave a cut over the ears to his nag, and rode away at a smart pace.

Having defrayed our respective bills at the Haycock Inn, Thirsk and I set out to walk the three-quarters of a mile that lay between the village of Welsdon and the Follingay Farm.

A pleasant walk along the winding road that summer morning, with Nicholas Thirsk for company. And certainly a man who improved upon acquaintance, despite its being a matter of doubt how much of earnestness mixed itself with his light jesting

vein. A man who might have been a different being under different circumstances, and whose family troubles seemed to have jarred upon him, and affected the natural good in his character. He was in a versatile mood that morning; he darted from subject to subject, and displayed no small acuteness, and even a certain amount of varied, if desultory, reading.

Until the present time, I had been somewhat of a student myself, caring more for books and book study than for those pursuits to which my father had wished to direct my attention, and the little quotations that so easily escaped him I more than once recognized; he would have won upon me far more speedily if he had not always mingled with his discourse the acrid vein, which rendered him sceptical of all intentions, and doubtful of all earnestness in human nature. If he had said, "Life's a mockery and full of schemers" at the breakfast table, it might

have more properly expressed the current of his own dark thoughts.

"I suppose all this wood on our right is the Freemantle estate," said Thirsk; "some rare shooting amongst these preserves, I would wager a fair crown."

"The owner is one of the lucky ones of the world, Thirsk."

"I have heard he is one of the most miserable devils under the sun," was the reply.

"Well, that is his own fault."

"Perhaps so."

We had neared the Farm by that time, and the rest of the way to the great gates was spent in silence between us.

It was a large farm, wherein much life was stirring. The bustle of many hands was evident in the farm-yard on which we looked as we descended the hill.

I had pictured a different farm to the one confronting us—an old thatched roof and a woodbine porch, in lieu of the great red-brick building that was not above five or

six years old. There was a pile of barns, also red-brick with slate roofs, to the right of the house, and we could hear the thump, thump, of a steam engine as we advanced. Matthew Genny, farmer, was evidently a man well-to-do in the world.

Matthew Genny, aforesaid, accompanied by a fresh-coloured, good looking young man, and a gaunt sheep-dog, came out of the gates to meet us.

“The farmer himself,” I remarked.

“Yes, there’s no doubt of that. The air of Welsdon must be good for the intellect, I take it. This is another sharp customer advancing, or I’m no judge of my species.”

And Matthew Genny looked a ‘sharp customer,’ as Thirsk termed it. He was a man below the middle height, and far from portly. If not as old, certainly looking as tough and wiry in frame as the Mr. Ipps whom he had sent to the Haycock Inn. Agrey-haired, pale-faced man, with a hooked nose that matched the bone handle of the riding

whip he carried, and with a pair of thin lips that betokened a man not inclined to let many secrets escape them—lips that could count money with a strange inward drawing of the breath, as if cash in hand were nearest his heart; and long bony fingers, that would not have looked out of placed dallying with a heap of sovereigns—regular miser's fingers! This was my first impression, which was a deceptive one, I may say here. A careful and a calculating man, but no miser, was Matthew Genny of Follingay Farm.

He smiled as we advanced, and, tucking his whip under his arm, offered a hand to each of us.

"Welcome to this part of the coountry, gentlemen. We shall make good farmers of ye, I hope."

"I hope so," was my answer, which Thirsk immediately echoed.

"Ye maun't disgrace an honest old man's teaching, either of ye. We turn out a

good breed of farmers from Welsdon in the Woods. This young gentleman here be my last specimen—and a credit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Genny,” said the young man at his side, with a pleasant laugh.

“Ye’ll be better acquainted, the three of ye, presently—I doan’t understand much about new-fangled styles of introduction—his name’s Grey.”

It was intended for an introduction, and we bowed, and looked a little foolishly at each other.

“And one or the other of these is Neider,” said Mr. Genny, “and the one left is Thirsk—two outlandish names, the couple of ’em,” he added, bluntly.

“Ah!” said Thirsk, “and two outlandish fellows. Look after us.”

“Ay! you’ll want it, may be.”

“Lucky you haven’t a pretty daughter for us to make love to, farmer,” said Thirsk.

“Ay! ay! but there’s a niece, and she,”

he added, with a sepulchral kind of chuckle, "can take care of herself, I'm inclined to think. This way, gentlemen."

So met on the hill-side four men, whose lives were destined to cross and recross each other, influencing each other's strangely, and casting many shadows in their pilgrimage, and working much of mystery.

CHAPTER III.

FOLLINGAY FARM.

MATTHEW GENNY was not of the old-fashioned order of farmers. He was a man quick to turn a penny to his own advantage, and seize any opportunity which presented to bring pennies to his purse. No farmer within twenty miles of Welsdon calculated so well the best time for hay-making and harvesting, and dodged so effectually the wet weather, which might have affected his crops. There was not a better cattle-breeder in the country, and at Follingay horse-fair he was more than a match for the dealers.

He was a lover of improvements, and

never sneered at those new-fashioned ways of sowing and reaping to which his forefathers had been strangers. What suited his forefathers would not suit him in the year 1856—he wanted “patents,” and “prize drills and ploughs,” and steam power; and there were some in Follingay to whisper that he was a little too speculative, and, good farmer as he was, did not prepare sufficiently for that rainy day that comes to each of us in turn.

Matthew Genny was a man of business though—every action bespoke business.

“This is my little counting-house, gentlemen,” he said, leading the way into an inner sanctum, across the threshold of which Mr. Grey did not follow us. “Here we may as well square the money matters, previously to arranging those little bits of things that require settling before we can understand each other. Short reckonings to begin with—eh, sirs?”

“Here is a cheque from my mother, on

the Carlisle Bank, for one hundred guineas," said I; "I presume you allude to the premium agreed upon between Mrs. Neider and yourself."

"Roight, my lad," said he, taking the cheque from me, and placing it in his pocket-book; "not that I be in so great a hurry for the money as all that—but square's square."

Nicholas Thirsk, with a lip that curled a little, despite him, opened his pocket-book and drew therefrom four ten-pound notes.

"I may as well follow suit, Mr. Genny," said he; "forty pounds was the very lowest sum, I believe, for four months?"

"The very lowest."

"I hope you understand that I do not come as a farm-pupil. That I have no intention of working as a farm-servant."

Mr. Genny looked from the notes towards the speaker, then back to the notes again.

"I'm thinking ye had better take your

"I've a fancy that ye are cooming here with foine gentleman notions—that ye want to know all about farming, without putting yeer-self to the trouble of working hard for your knowledge. That woan't answer."

"I intend to study the matter—but you see, Mr. Genny, I never expect to be a farmer."

"Oh!"

"I may obtain a farm-bailiff's place some day, perhaps, but never a farm. That is," he added, "my idea at present. Of course the world will roll round, and I shall be uppermost or undermost, according to my luck."

"Ay!" said Genny, dubiously regarding him.

"But any advice you have to give me, I shall be happy to entertain. I'm here to

get my forty pounds' worth for my money."

"And it's yeer own fault if ye doan't get it," said he, stowing away Thirsk's notes, an operation which their late owner regarded silently, and even a little sorrowfully; "and my first advice be—obey orders. I've your money, and I should loike to do my duty by ye. I've turned out mony a good farmer from this place, and I've seen mony a milksop leave no wiser than he coom. If you don't work with a wull, take to something else."

He drew himself nearer the table, and scrawled two hasty receipts for the money we had given him. Thirsk, standing at the back of him, shrugged his shoulders, and made a wry face at me, the meaning of which I could only comprehend to be his contempt for Mr. Genny's remarks, so I stared very stolidly at him, by way of reply. I had come to pursue farming honestly, and

swerve not at the practical part; for what reason Nicholas Thirsk had arrived seemed a matter of doubt.

"There's the receipts," said he; "and now, gentlemen, put away the foine notions with your foine boots. If ye want to be grand, this bean't the home for it. Farmers be always homely people—we're of the homeliest, and, of course, ye fall into our ways, we not into yourn. We breakfast, dine, and tea early—we've our own cured hams, and our own home-brewed—we're generally in bed by nine o'clock in summer toime, and eight in winter. Daybreak always sees us up. That's all I need say at present."

"I don't think we shall infringe much on your rules."

"All the better, gentlemen. Now, if ye'll coom with me into the other room, ye shall make the acquaintance of my niece; and, by the way, Mr. Thirsk——"

"Sir," responded that gentleman.

"In our first bit of scribble together, when

ye opened your views to me about this place, ye mentioned a friend's name."

"Robin Genny."

"Ay—a writing man. Writes a moighty lot of rubbish, I fancy; but then I'm a coontryman, who doan't know people's taste in town. May I ask if ye have seen that gentleman?"

"Yes—this morning."

"Eh! lad?" said Genny, surprised.

Thirsk repeated his assertion.

"Darmed if I didn't think he told me he was off to London last noight! A good fellow in his way, but I doan't understand his way quite so well as Harriet. And so he's still in Welsdon!"

"Yes; staying at the country house of one Peter Ricksworth, for an hour or two."

"Do ye know Ricksworth?" asked Genny, sharply.

"I had the pleasure of seeing that gentleman this morning."

"Perhaps the less you see of him the better."

"Possibly."

"It's hard to say that of one's own brother-in-law; but so it be, and all the foine speeches won't soften the matter. This way."

He led the way into a spacious room, well carpeted and furnished, having some sporting prints, and a portrait of Matthew Genny, that was not a bit like him, on the wall. At the broad window, at the extremity of the room, Mr. Grey stood talking to the farmer's niece, evidently giving some little sketch of Thirsk and me, for the amusement of the lady, whose face wore a quiet, almost a grave smile, as she listened.

"Harriet, my dear, these are the two young men I have been talking about lately—Mr. Thirsk and Mr. Neider."

Harriet Genny bowed in a very lady-like manner for a farmer's niece, and just glanced

at us for a moment. Mr. Thirsk and I both regarded her with more interest.

A tall girl of one or two-and-twenty, with a grave, almost an anxious face. Neither a blonde nor a brunette, nor of any particular class of beauty—her hair of a rich brown, and her eyes of a deep hazel, that had some of the brightness and shrewdness of her uncle's in them. For one living in the country her face might have been less pale, the cheek-bones a shade less prominent. And yet it was altogether a striking face. Not a pretty face, with features far from regular, but still the face of an earnest woman, looking at life far from frivolously, and knowing her duties in it, and following her way therein steadily and persistently. Her duties might run counter to her inclinations very often, but she looked a woman who never let the latter master her.

“I think we'll have a mug of Follingay ale, by way of a beginning, Harriet.”

“Shall Jane——”

“What! the old Follingay? No, no, that woan’t do. Only ye or I, lass, maun touch that brew.”

At this hint Harriet departed to draw the beer herself, and Thirsk said, carelessly—

“Your daughter, did you say?”

“Noa, I haven’t been blessed with one, Mr. Thirsk. She’s only my niece—a good girl—the very best of girls. She and I doan’t have many cross words together, though I be a little hot at toimes.”

“Quite a comfort to you in your old age.”

“I’m not so very old, Mr. Thirsk,” replied Mr. Genny, a little sharply.

“Well—no.”

And Mr. Thirsk seemed to take a critical examination of the farmer, as though anxious to divest himself of his first impression concerning him.

Harriet returned with a tray containing four glasses and a large mug of the ale of which Matthew Genny was so choice, and

Matthew Genny poured the frothing liquid into the glasses, which he held one by one to the light before passing to us.

"Rare good ale this be, gentlemen—though I say it, who brewed it four years ago, coom next harvest. Ale which I'm a little proud of, and only bring out on grand occasions loike the present."

"What occasion would you call this, now?" asked Thirsk, curiously.

"Well, it's an increase of my family by two. It's two new sons at my side if ye serve me fairly, as I expect to be served. Here's to our good understanding, and may I make two first-rate farmers of ye both."

"Thank you," I answered.

Thirsk did not respond, but drank his ale at a draught, and put the glass down without comment. Genny looked from him to me, as if expecting a few encomiums on his ale, and I hastened to add that it was fine old ale—which I could honestly aver without exaggeration.

"Take another soop of it," he cried heartily; "it won't hurt ye. There's only the real malt and hop in it. None of the stuff ye get in London, moind ye."

He filled my glass and held it to the light again, and looked at it in a fatherly manner. Thirsk's silence regarding its merits made him a little uneasy—he had been accustomed to much praise concerning it, and he was somewhat tenacious on the point.

"Shall I fill your glass, sir?" he asked.

"Thank you—thank you!"

"Ye doan't like it, mayhap?"

"Oh! I've tasted worse ale," said Thirsk, carelessly.

"Ay—I'll swear ye have!" was the sharp if conceited answer.

"And here's another toast," said I: "Health and happiness to all in Follingay Farm!"

"Thankee, sir, thankee. A generous toast! By dad, we shall get on!" and

Genny tossed off his second glass with us, and then looked round at his niece, "Did ye hear that now, Harriet?"

"Yes."

"That's a good sweeping toast, that doan't leave even the cat out—what do ye say, Mr. Thirsk?"

He appeared to be rather puzzled by Mr. Thirsk's manner, and his keen grey eyes turned again to his new pupil.

"A toast we can heartily drink, however much we may be assured of its falsity. I like yours the best, Mr. Genny, and so here's success to the object with which we came hither."

"I didn't say that."

"You implied the same, in different words."

"Ay," said Genny, repeating that hesitative affirmative which he generally adopted, when doubtful as to the right answer necessary.

Harriet Genny stood by the window look-

ing towards the speakers, and evidently interested in us. There was a singularity in Thirsk's manner which had struck her as well as her uncle, and she stood quietly regarding him from her post of observation. Thirsk looked towards her.

"Will not Miss Genny wish us success in a glass of her uncle's favourite ale?"

"Not at present, sir."

The reply was brief, even a little abrupt, and did not court further questioning. But Mr. Thirsk was in an aggravating mood, and might have pressed the request, had not Genny curtailed matters by saying:—

"Well, gentlemen, perhaps before dinner ye'd like to go over part of the farm?"

"I'm tired," said Thirsk; "I hope this evening or to-morrow will do for myself. I sat up late last night trying to finish a few matters that required immediate attention—I have an hour's work still on hand."

"Well, doan't neglect work, sir, or ye'll

never roise in the world. Perhaps ye are *not* too busy, Mr. Neider? "

"I should like to see the farm."

"This way then, sir. We've our work coot out before dinner."

Mr. Genny led the way out of the farmhouse, and across the spacious farm-yard to the fields lying beyond—corn-fields, clover-fields and meadow-land, stretching far away across the country. Mr. Genny gave a comprehensive sweep with his whip.

"It be all there, sir. That's the field of work for the next year—a large book to stoody, and to make anything oot of."

"I suppose so."

"Noine hundred and odd acres, and I'm the only man yet that's ever made a penny by 'em."

"How's that?" I asked, as we walked on.

"The land's dear, and a quarter of it runs beside that plantation yonder."

"I see."

“And the darmed game, which to touch is more than my lease’s worth, plays a moighty lot of damage with the corn, and eats the tops off the young wheat, and picks out the seeds, and does everything mischievous. What the deevil Sir Richard keeps the game for, be more than I can understand, or ever shall. He’s a man that doan’t take naturally to company.”

“An old man, perhaps?”

“Forty, or so, with a face loike a death’s-head. But I’ve nothing to complain of, take him altogether.”

Short as were the legs of Matthew Genny, I found some difficulty in keeping up with him—his little steps went so quickly over the ground. In less than a mile’s wandering with Matthew Genny, I saw enough to convince me of the thoroughly practical mind of my future tutor. Everything around betokened a man who knew how to turn his land to its best use; whose knowledge of the art of sowing and reaping

was something so deep and concentrated as to leave me in despair of ever following his steps. After all he was not of a reticent nature; on the contrary, seemed anxious to initiate me into too many mysteries at once, thus confusing me with his information. He was a man, too, who expected a fair amount of work from his servants, and the extra diligence evinced by the men whom he suddenly encountered told of a taskmaster whose frowns were to be feared.

"Ye have a farm in Coomberland, Mr. Neider?" he said after a time.

"Yes—a very small one."

"Small farms are not the worst farms," he remarked; "and if a man sets his heart on making his land pay, he wull do it. We shall make a good farmer of *ye*."

"Do you think so?"

"Well, there's a cut aboot ye that means work. Now, that other young fellow—but perhaps he's a friend of yours?"

"I met him for the first time last night at the Haycock Inn."

"Do ye think, now, that he'll take to farming?—does he speak much about it?"

"Very little."

Mr. Genny nibbled at the horn hook to his whip.

"He be an odd customer, rather. He's coom and flung away forty poonds as clean as ever I saw it doon in my life. He cares as much for farming as a cat, I'd bet a shilling, now. Be he anything of a scribbler, do ye know?"

"An author, do you mean?"

"Ay."

That was a peculiar "Ay" of Matthew Genny's, and peculiarly pronounced, like a long "I." It implied so much—it was a reflective kind of affirmative, negative, anything. It always appeared to be waiting for something to escape you, and on which a pounce could be made. Certainly he was

a keen old gentleman, in more matters than farming.

"I don't know—I don't think so."

"His father's a gentleman, Robin tells me."

"Robin?"

"Ay."

There was a pause, then he added—

"Robin Genny—my nephew, whom I spoke of a short while ago. One of the scribblers, too, and a rare lazy loon, with about as much knowledge of the world as yon bramble-bush, for all his Loondon life and society. A poor muck of a fellow!—the Lord help him! So I thought, maybe, as they were acquaintances—birds of a feather-loike. But this Mr. Thirsk is a darmed deal deeper than Robin, or I'm clean Halifaxed—he's too deep for me at present," he added, a little conceitedly.

I did not reply. I was far from inclined to make Mr. Nicholas Thirsk the subject of conversation; it seemed hardly fair to him,

who might be one of the best of fellows, for what I knew to the contrary. At present he appeared to me a man a little unsettled in mind; when we were all better friends, I hinted, it was likely we should all understand each other better.

"I'm not curious," said Genny, "and ye're right about knowing each other better. Only, ye see," as if by way of apology for his persistence, "he cooms a stranger into my house, and it's fair I should know as much about him as I can afford to get hold of. He's one of those dark-faced chaps ye don't read all at once, loike——"

"Like my very plain countenance," I added, laughing.

"Ay," he answered, and laughed too.

We found the subject of conversation in the farm-yard on our return. He had fraternized with the yard-dog, the bad-tempered canine brute of which we had been warned last night at the Haycock Inn;

he was patting it very affectionately as we entered the yard.

“Take care there, Mr. Thirsk. He doan’t take kindly to strangers.”

“Oh! he has taken to me! I knew he would, by the look of him.”

And the dog was certainly inclined to be hail-fellow-well-met with Nicholas Thirsk, and leaped, and rattled his chain, and rubbed his great head against the legs of his new-formed acquaintance.

Mr. Grey, standing at the side door leading into the farm-house, seemed to be surveying the scene with no little curiosity.

“Why, William,” the farmer called out, “Mr. Thirsk shows more courage in a day than ye have in a year.”

“I’m not fond of dogs,” he answered, with a frank laugh; “and particularly that dog.”

“My father had a hundred,” cried Thirsk, “and only one of them ever showed its teeth at me.”

"And what did ye do with him?" asked Genny.

"Oh! I shot him!" was the careless reply.

"Ay," remarked Matthew Genny, and the hooked handle of his whip went towards his thin lips again.

"It's the best way to serve anything that's likely to prove you false," remarked Thirsk.

"I would prefer giving the animal a wide range, to sending it out of the world," said Grey.

"Affording it a chance to bite others—that's Christianity."

We dined at one o'clock in the large dining-room, wherein we had tasted the Follingay ale; Harriet Genny said grace at some length, and Thirsk sat by the side of me, and kept his great dark eyes fixed attentively on her face. When she had finished, he burst forth with,

"I have never heard a prayer so well delivered in my life!"

Harriet Genny made no answer; did not even bend her head by way of return to the compliment.

"I am not attempting flattery, Miss Genny."

"I am pleased to hear it, sir," was the short answer.

"Perhaps Miss Genny objects to flattery?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I've heard many a lady make that assertion before," said Thirsk, drily.

"By dad, yes!" cried Genny, with a chuckle, as he commenced carving a huge round of beef; "it's a habit of theirs."

"Not that I doubt Miss Genny's word for an instant—I hope she will believe that."

Miss Genny was not to be drawn into conversation. The slightest inclination of the head might be taken as a response or not, according to the observer's fancy.

"I did not intend flattery, I repeat," continued Thirsk, who was vexatiously pressing on that point; "but Miss Genny's grace

offered so great a contrast to the many graces I have heard in my time—slipshod graces, with as much reverence in them as in this knife. And I am a fair critic in this matter—for I was piously brought up ! ”

The peculiar intonation with which he concluded, drew all eyes towards him again, but Thirsk was politely assisting with the potatoes, and whether he spoke in derision, or in sober earnest, there was no guessing from his face. I, who had been a witness to his peculiar humours yesternight, had my own opinion on the matter.

The early dinner was quietly proceeded with—Mr. Genny took the lead in the conversation, and discussed farming matters, to which none of us paid any particular attention, and leaned across the table, directing the whole force of his conversation to me, which was somewhat embarrassing. Thirsk ate but little dinner, and seemed annoyed at Mr. Genny pressing him with reasons for his want of appetite; the far-

mer's niece was taciturn, and even, I fancied at times, a little vexed.

The impression began to deepen on me that Harriet Genny was a short-tempered damsel, with the somewhat desirable accomplishment of keeping her tempers to herself, and not allowing them to intrude upon general society. It was hardly sulkiness, however, for she answered readily all questions put to her, and only refrained from starting a general topic. Possibly I had misjudged her, I thought at a later hour, when my trunks had not arrived, and I had begged the favour of writing materials for a short while.

Mr. Thirsk had suddenly wished to see a little of the farm, and gone out with Mr. Genny and Grey, and I was left alone that summer evening with the farmer's niece.

"My travelling-desk is still at the railway station, Miss Genny—and I am anxious to let my mother know that I have reached Follingay Farm."

"Your mother will be naturally anxious to hear from you," she said.

"Yes; and I promised on the first night of my arrival to write a few lines."

"Do you always keep your promises, Mr. Neider?" she asked.

It was a strange question, and I looked up from the writing materials which she had placed before me. She was standing on the other side of the table, arranging the lamp to her satisfaction, and I met her eyes directed full towards me.

"When it is possible."

"I don't understand you."

"There are some promises that are impossible to keep, I fancy."

"Why are they made, then?"

"Oh! a moment of impulse may form them sometimes."

"Are you impulsive?"

"Not very, I think."

She seemed anxious to put another question, but altered her mind, and went from

the room, leaving me to write my long-promised letter to my mother. For I had not come direct from Cumberland, but had been to London, to see my mother's solicitor, and my father's executors, and to state my intentions of following the farming, in fulfilment of that father's last wishes.

My mother loved long letters from her son ; and I was her only son, who held the first place in her heart. Ever to me had she been the best and most indulgent of mothers ; and I did not begrudge the time bestowed upon the long epistle which I began to write. I had not much to tell her ; I had not met with a great deal of adventure ; I could not say how I liked the new faces which had gathered round me ; whether I should ever settle down at Follingay Farm, and say this is my home ! Still I was resolved to make the best of it, and I knew it would please her to hear that I had turned with a will to the farming. A little pleased that dear mother of mine, and I did

not cast a shadow amidst the spare news I had to communicate. There was no occasion for me to dilate on the old thoughts and old wishes that I had sunk for ever—on ambitious dreams that I had had, and which were gone,—on the different life I had sketched out for myself *once*. We all have such dreams, and sooner or later they elude us; if mine parted from me somewhat suddenly, still mine was a strength that could bear the disruption. I had resolved to become a farmer, and I let the old vague hopes go down the stream, and turned my back upon them. It was the wish of one sleeping in the churchyard, amidst the Cumberland fells, and it exacted from me nothing more harsh and unreasonable than that of following in his steps. Whither my own might have led, God knows—there was a mother to provide for, and *he* thought for the best. Perhaps I acted for the best also—who can tell?

CHAPTER IV.

MERCY RICKSWORTH.

PULLING one's hair behind is not a courteous mode of attracting one's attention. It suggested itself to me that it was somewhat of a liberty, and a very unaccountable liberty, too, whoever it might be.

I was conscious of changing colour very much, or rather of assuming a bright brick-dust hue, before I mustered sufficient courage to confront my tormentor. I was conscious, also, of running over the names of the parties who could feel themselves, on so early an acquaintance, warranted in taking such a liberty. Mr. Grey or Mr. Genny

was not likely to adopt such a course; Thirsk, who I suspected might be seized with a freak of the kind, was absent with the others—and, good Heavens!—if it were Miss Genny!—how greatly I had been mistaken in that matter-of-fact damsel!

I turned round, and was surprised to find a perfect stranger at the back of my chair.

A pretty stranger, too, of not more than seventeen years of age—a dark-haired, dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked English girl. Brightly but still neatly dressed; she seemed to lighten up the gloomy parlour in which I had been so intently occupied.

“Oh! my good gracious!—I beg your pardon, sir—I thought it was Mr. Grey!”

She did not betray quite so much confusion as many young ladies might have done under the circumstances—on the contrary, there was, amidst her blushes, a humorous enjoyment of her mistake and my intense surprise.

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"N-no, miss—it's not Mr. Grey. I believe that gentleman is somewhere about the farm with Mr. Genny."

"I don't want him—thank you. I have just run in to see my cousin Harriet."

"She is in the next room, I believe, miss."

"No—she is not," was the flat contradiction of Miss Genny, who entered at this moment; "well, Mercy," addressing her cousin, "what has brought you, so late, from Welsdon Hall?"

"Merely a wish to see if you were still living, Harriet. It's so long a time since I have heard a word concerning you."

"It's a dark night."

"But no one's going to eat me up in the darkness, dear, and it's only three quarters of a mile to the Hall."

"Have you been home?"

"Oh!—no," was the emphatic response; "what is there in home to send me dancing all the way to the village?"

"A mother and father," was the dry rejoinder.

"Yes, that's true—but I saw them yesterday, Harriet—and Cousin Robin, too," with a sly look into Harriet's face, which betrayed nothing.

"Sit down, Mercy—your uncle will be back in a minute or two. If he's cross at you keeping late hours, you must not be very much surprised."

"Cross at my showing a little affection to my own flesh and blood, and growing tired of that dark gloomy house!" she ejaculated.

"Not that."

"Perhaps," she added, a little petulantly, "Uncle Genny is growing too proud to see a poor servant-maid."

"Not that either. Always unjust, Mercy."

"Well, let us sit down and have a little chat, Harriet. I've so much to tell you. Of the company we have had to-day

to look over those tiresome old ruins, with me wandering about with a key like a dreadful gaoler as I am—of Sir Richard Freemantle going to London yesterday, and of Miss Agatha's return—of such a many things, Harriet !”

“ I am afraid we shall be disturbing Mr. Neider,” said Miss Genny.

“ Not at all—not at all,” I hastened to reply.

“ And oh ! I made such a dreadful mistake !” whispered Mercy ; and she related, in an undertone, her little adventure with myself, winding up with a peal of laughter that rang like music through the room.

Harriet sat by her side near the window, and did not smile much at the incident—on the contrary, I fancied there was a slight contraction of her high white forehead.

“ What's the matter ? ” asked Mercy, suddenly becoming grave too.

“ Nothing, Mercy. Why do you ask ? ”

"You're so very grave and cross to-day. But you always are after Robin Genny has been here."

"How do you know that?" was the sharp inquiry.

"Do you think I am a blind girl?"

"I don't think you always know what you are talking about," said Harriet, petulantly.

"Perhaps not," was the hasty answer.

I could not forbear looking up from my letter at this. The cousins were evidently both out of temper, and both inclined to resent the other's observations. Still it was but a hasty little skirmish of words, that was soon over, and Mercy was in the middle of her news when the farmer and his two pupils re-entered the house.

"What! no supper laid yet!" ejaculated Genny; "and we be half an hoor late, and ought to have been in our beds."

"The experiment with the dog has taken up the time," remarked Thirsk.

"Ay," said the farmer, "and a braw experiment it was. What do you think of Mr. Thirsk unfastening Nero for the night, and not being torn to pieces? I'm thinking ye've been to the chemist's shop, lad, and bought some doctor's stuff."

Thirsk laughed, and reiterated that dogs always took to him kindly. Mr. Genny turned to his niece.

"Well, lass, ye're keeping late hours enough. What has brought ye here, Mercy?"

"I have just answered that question to Harriet," said Mercy, a little pertly.

"Be it too much trooble to answer again?"

"I have only run over for a gossip with Harriet."

"At a most unreasonable hoor, my lass—but no matter. How's all at the old place?"

"Very well."

"I'm thinking ye'd be better gooing now, Mercy—it's a quarter to nine, and

it'll be past the 'hour before ye get home."

I had finished my letter, closed the envelope, and was leaning back in the chair regarding the scene. It was with no little surprise that I saw Mercy glance very rapidly towards Nicholas Thirsk. It might have been mere girlish curiosity I thought, but still there was something strange in the manner with which Thirsk—to whom I turned—met her glance. He frowned like an ogre, and then walked to the end of the room, and began taking one book after another from a side-table, and glancing carelessly at the contents. This position he maintained until Mercy Ricksworth had departed, after previously wishing the farmer, his niece, and Mr. Grey good night.

I heard Mr. Grey say in a low voice—

"Aren't you frightened of that long, dark road, Mercy?"

"I'm never frightened at anything, Mr. Grey," she said with a merry laugh, as she tripped out into the farm-yard, and was

heard a moment afterwards scolding Nero, for leaping up at her and soiling her blue merino dress.

“Drat that girl!—what a toime of night to goo home!” muttered the farmer; and then suddenly remembering two other subjects for vexatious discussion, he said very sharply:—

“Why bean’t the supper on the table?—and where’s that old Ipps?”

“Ipps has gone to the railway station for Mr. Neider’s boxes.”

“Darm his eyes!—he’s been long enough to fetch the railway station itself!”

“Not quite, measter,” and Ipps walked unceremoniously into the parlour.

“Well, where have ye been, stupid?” inquired Genny.

“At the railway after the boxes, which I aren’t got.”

“Ay?”

“There’s been a spill on the line, and a block up, and the luggage will come to-

morrow. The express run into a goods, as usual."

"Anyone hurt?" asked Grey.

"Only a shake up or two. I saw Sir Richard turn out of the station with his head tied up. Looked loike an old Guyfox, measter."

Thirsk dropped the books he had been scanning, and burst into a hearty laugh—so hearty that Genny, who had been inclined to enjoy Ipps's comparison himself, ceased his own hilarity to regard that of his pupil.

"You're a humourist, Ipps," said Thirsk.

"No, I ain't anything of the sort," returned Ipps, a little indignantly.

"A dry stick," turning to Genny, who nodded his head, and said "Ay!"

"So the gentleman maun wait for his traps till to-morrow," said Ipps; "and so good night, measters."

"I have the advantage of you, Neider," said Thirsk to me; "lucky the man who carries his luggage with him!"

After supper, Mr. Genny said,

"There's a double-bedded room for Mr. Grey and one of ye gentlemen, and a single for the t'other—I suppose ye can settle the matter amongst yeerselves?"

"Oh! yes." Thirsk answered for us.

"These are infernal early hours," he muttered, when we three farm pupils were on the landing-place; "how does it agree with you, Mr. Grey?"

"Oh! pretty well."

"Early hours agree with some folk—others they drive melancholy mad. Is this my room?"

"It's either yours or Mr. Neider's," answered Grey; "whichever way you feel inclined to settle it."

"Well, I am of eccentric habits—write at times till a late hour, and should be inclined to keep my companion awake, by knocking over a few things. But if Mr. Neider insists, why——"

And, like Brutus, he paused for a reply.

I was not inclined to reply too hastily. Mr. Thirsk had in the first instance seemed disposed to claim the room as his right; but I was standing on the order of my dignity, and had always been a little disputatious.

"Let us see the room, Mr. Thirsk."

We entered the room—a neatly-furnished room, with a window looking upon the farm-yard.

"Well, what's it to be?" asked Thirsk, irritably.

"The question is, who has the greater right to this snug hermitage?" I said.

"I don't know that there is any right in the case," said Thirsk; "seniority against rank—which is it to be, Mr. Grey?"

Mr. Thirsk spoke bitterly, but I was becoming quite used to his sarcasm.

"Oh! I'm a bad umpire in matters of dispute," said Grey, good-humouredly; "when I was at school, we boys settled such differences by the toss up of a halfpenny."

"Exactly—heads and tails, on the old aristocratic principle. 'Lay on, Macduff, and damned be he'—who gets the best bedroom!"

Thirsk spun a half-sovereign in the air, caught it in the palm of his left hand, and covered it with the fingers of his right.

"Now then, first time, Neider. Head or woman?"

"Woman!"

"Right you are!" and Thirsk turned away with affected unconcern, and began swearing in an audible voice over the carpet-bag, which he had caught up in his hand.

"Now, Mr. Grey, friend and comate, you don't object to a man who walks in his sleep?"

"So he don't walk over me, I'm not particular."

"Mr. Neider," looking at me savagely, "I wish you good night."

"Do you particularly desire this bedroom?" I asked.

"Chiefly for the reason that I'm likely to be a nuisance to any one who sleeps in the same room with me," he answered; "but the die has been cast, and the hazard is against me."

"Well—I resign, Thirsk."

"Do you mean it?"

"I always mean what I say."

"Then you're a jolly good fellow, and I'll remember you in my will. Thanks!"

And he dropped his carpet-bag, and took off his coat with unusual alacrity.

"What a thing it is to have friends," he said, the mocking vein returning, now his point had been gained; "dear, considerate friends, who study one's little peculiarities. You play Damon to my Pythias, Neider. Good night—good night, Mr. Grey."

We echoed his good nights and crossed the landing into a much larger room, having a bed at each end thereof.

"Have you any choice?" asked Grey, with a wave of his hand towards the beds.

"Not any."

"Then I'll keep to my own, with your good leave. When I become used to anything, I don't like to give it up. Here's the days in the old farm growing beautifully less, and I have just settled down therein too," and he heaved quite a sigh as he concluded.

"When do you leave us, Mr. Grey?"

"Now, don't 'Mr. Grey' a fellow so—it's keeping one too much at arm's length."

"Grey, then."

"Thankee. The truth is," he said, in reply to my question, "I don't know when I shall leave you. I was put here out of harm's way, and, till my father finds a farm for me, why, I may as well stop here as anywhere else. I'm one less at home, and there's sixteen there now."

"A large family."

"Yes; lucky the governor made something out of his silversmith's shop in Gracechurch Street, for we've pulled hard at him,

and done our best to keep him down. Have you any brothers and sisters?"

"No, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately, eh? Well, it *is* unfortunate, after all—for quarrel and fight as they do, they keep the place lively; and it is astonishing, Neider, how differently one thinks of them all, when six or seven months pass and there's never a glimpse caught of the old faces. I suppose I'm a domestic animal."

"All the better for you."

"Still, I like this part of the world, and fancy I could settle to a farm hereabouts. I took to farming from a boy—possibly because I wasn't a good hand at either figures or classics. The stupid member of a family always becomes a farmer, Neider."

"Indeed!"

"Oh! I beg your pardon, I forgot *you*!" and he laughed very pleasantly at the omission.

"The imputation does not settle on me,

Grey—I have not sought farming, but had farming thrust upon me.”

“And a very good thing, too.”

“Amen to it.”

“Now for a fair division of spoil—this half of the room belongs to you, the other to your humble servant. You’ll know my half by the picture gallery,” pointing to a dozen or two of photographs on the wall.

“Family pictures, Grey?”

“Yes, all the brothers and sisters belonging to me. Do you object to the rattle of dumb-bells in the morning?”

“Oh, no—and I’ll borrow yours, if you’ll allow me, till mine arrive.”

“Certainly—certainly. Anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

“Boxing-gloves or single-sticks—if you’re fond of that kind of exercise, I don’t mind knocking you about a bit.”

“Thank you. I may remind you of your kind offer in a day or two.”

“I think we shall get on very well,” said

he, his good-tempered face bright and radiant; "you're a lad after my own heart, I'm inclined to think. Are you afraid of Genny working you too hard?"

"Not I. I am here to work hard."

"You're not exactly obliged to work, though Mr. Genny likes to see his pupils making themselves generally useful—especially in harvest time. When you want any relaxation, we'll go over Welsdon Castle."

"Is there a castle in the neighbourhood?"

"There's the remains of a castle—uncommonly interesting remains they are, too. They are on the Freemantle estate."

"That girl who was here this evening—is she employed to show visitors over the ruins?" I said, remembering some portion of her previous remarks.

"Yes, she is."

Mr. Grey became purple in the face, coughed violently, ran his hands through his light curly hair, suddenly veered

round and knocked over his hair-brush, and a couple of pomatum pots. I was heart-free, and inclined to be chief inquisitor.

“A friend of yours?”

“I never said so,” he replied hoarsely, as he stooped to pick up the articles appertaining to his toilet-table.

“No, but I thought so, Grey.”

“What the deuce made you think that?”

“She took me for a gentleman of the name of Grey this evening, and——”

“And what?” he cried, gasping for breath.

“And tugged at my hair very unceremoniously whilst I was writing.”

“By George, that’s good! Did she, though?”

And William Grey sat on the edge of his bedstead, and laughed very heartily at the mistake.

“You must have stared a little,” said he. “What a young kitten she is! Well

for her, perhaps, that she has such life and spirits, seeing what a dark background there is to her young life. A good girl, who fights against the horrors bravely."

"Indeed!"

"She has such a devil of a father," he said confidentially.

"I know it."

"Why, you know everything!" cried he in amazement.

"I believe I saw that gentleman rather the worse for liquor last night at the Haycock Inn."

"If you ever see him anything else, bless your eyes, for it'll be a rare sight. He possesses the one virtue of loving his daughter a little; that's all I can say of that black-muzzled old scamp. She was glad to get away from her home, and become even a show-girl to the ruins of Welsdon Castle."

"Why isn't she here?"

"Genny don't take kindly to the Ricks-

worths—the father has been tried on and off half a dozen times, and always been found grievously wanting. And Genny is a man who makes the whole family answer for the sins of the one. He has his likes and his dislikes, after the usual fashion. But you look drowsy ? ”

“ I sat up last night, and our friend Thirsk was a little restless in the next room.”

“ A restless fellow. Whatever made him think of the farming, I wonder ? ”

“ I wonder, too.”

“ Not a bad sort though—a trifle too sharp, perhaps, take him for all in all. Well, good night, young farmer.”

“ Good night to you.”

CHAPTER V.

LIFE BEGINS.

MR. MATTHEW GENNY did not intend his farm pupils to be idle. The harvest was coming on, and the services of three vigorous young men would save something from current expenses, if they could be turned to any account before the busy season set in.

“A man to be a good farmer should know how to sow, mow, and reap,” was Genny’s axiom. “I passed through all the grades myself, and have saved many a good poond by my knowledge of what was a fair day’s work. Now, who be afraid of work, to begin with?”

“Didn’t I tell you yesterday I was afraid of nothing?” said Thirsk; “I’m in a rare mood for hard work to-day.”

“Ay, and that’s more than ye were yesterday.”

“I was tired—out of sorts—spiteful—anything! Why shouldn’t a man be as variable in his moods as the sky that frowns or smiles over his head? If I work very hard to-day, set it in the balance against a slack time when my patience gives way. Now, then, what can I do to show you what a promising pupil you have?”

“Ipps can teach ye to handle a scythe.”

“Ipps for ever! Ipp, Ipp, hurrah!” cried Thirsk, wildly; “where’s that ruddy skeleton to be found?”

“By the plantation.”

Thirsk started at once, and though Genny called after him half-a-dozen instructions, he was too excited or too indifferent to attend to them.

"Mayhap he's half-mad," muttered Genny to himself; "Robin told me two days ago I should not make much oot of him—but if he loikes to spend forty pounds in learning the farming, why, I have no particular objection. Still," with a shake of his head, "I've a mortal dislike to taking mooney for no mooney's worth. Will ye put yourself in Mr. Grey's charge for a day, Mr. Neider?"

"Willingly."

"He's a good hand, moind ye."

And with this compliment to his favourite pupil Mr. Genny left us.

The story of my farming progress is not the story that I have set myself to write—I need not dwell at any great length on the details of my second day at Follingay Farm. Suffice it to say that I did a hard day's work—it seemed the hardest that my life had hitherto known—and that it was more difficult because I used my best exertions to "work with a will," and take an

interest in the labour of my hands. But it became pure mechanism, and my thoughts went far away from Welsdon.

This continual absence of mind irritated me; I was new to my work, and made no allowances. I had expected to change like a harlequin, as if all the thoughts of a life could be puffed away by a breath!

That evening I found my desk and travelling-case in the parlour, and was informed that Ipps had carried my trunk and portmanteau to my room. I intended to sit up later that evening than the rest, and amuse myself with a small bon-fire in the kitchen-range; so, with a nod to Grey, and a "don't wait," I remained at my open desk after his and Thirsk's departure.

"Shall ye be long up, Mr. Neider?" asked Genny, nibbling at the stem of his after-supper pipe.

"Not a great while," I answered; "am I infringing your rules?"

"Ay, a little. Harriet always looks about her for the last thing."

"I will not keep her waiting a great while."

Ten minutes afterwards I was in the kitchen of Follingay Farm, with a bundle of manuscripts under my arm. In the kitchen I met Miss Genny, who looked with surprise at my huge parcel.

"What is the matter, Mr. Neider?"

"Nothing, Miss Genny. I have a few papers that are better in the fire than anywhere else. Will you allow me to consume them?"

"I can have no objection."

She stood by the mantel-piece, and watched the proceedings with some interest. I do not know whether my face betrayed any undue excitement, but as the first leaves fluttered amongst the red coals, she said—

"Have you well considered this step?"

"Yes, Miss Genny."

"I think it is a rash one."

"I am not conscious of having made a rash step in my life."

"You are a fortunate man."

"Are you smiling at my vanity, Miss Genny?"

"Perhaps I am."

I added a fresh pile to the flames, and she continued to watch the operation.

"Do you know, I am a curious woman?" she said, abruptly.

"I was not aware of it before."

"I hate mystery, and pretence of mystery, in any shape and form," she said; "my hard and practical life prefers a plain reason for a simple action. May I ask what those papers contain?"

I smiled, and she said sharply,

"Haven't I confessed to being a curious woman?"

"There is no mystery, only a little self-sacrifice. The consigning to the red embers many follies and ambitions,—schemes of advancement, of fame, and a name in the world.

There are they smouldering, and the hand of a father consigns to the flames all his offspring!"

"You are a Spartan?"

"No; a German."

"You are an author?" she asked, with more acerbity.

"No."

"No?" she said, as if doubting the fact.

"Once I had hoped to be one," I said, a little mournfully; "I have made more than one endeavour to rush into print, and I have learned what a hard task it is! I was becoming dreamy and theoretical—seeing in everything round me but romance and poetry, and losing the sober chances of life in a fog of idealism. I have only woke up, miss."

"You are a strange young man."

"Simply a firm one."

"Is firmness, after all, a virtue?"

"Ill-tempered people call it obstinacy."

"That's true."

She suddenly laid her hand upon my arm.

"I am a year or two your senior, I daresay, and may take the liberty of offering you a little advice. Don't burn any more of those papers."

"They are worth nothing."

"I do not suppose for an instant that there is a valuable copyright amongst them, but still I say don't burn them. It seems hard that the work of many a long day and night should be ended so unceremoniously."

"Miss Genny, these papers are tempters. They would lure me back to the old dreamy world, and make the life I have chosen distasteful. And it is the life I have promised my father."

"What! another promise!"

"Yes."

"Did he object to authorship and authors?"

"He saw which way I was drifting, and he possibly knew the extent of my abilities,

and what they would end in. He spoke of his farm and my mother—my uncle was a German author, who died mad—and he begged me to follow his profession, and abjure that which must infallibly deceive me. He would have died unhappy; he was right, too—and I promised.”

“And you consider yourself bound by that promise?” she asked, with great eagerness.

“Yes.”

“It was a cruel one!” she responded.

“Why?” I asked, suddenly, almost angrily.

She had been watching the last packet of papers consume and shrivel to nothingness; she seemed to have drifted away on a current of thoughts foreign to mine, for she started at my imperious question, and seemed endeavouring to collect her ideas before she answered. I was surprised to see how pale she had become.

“For a dying man or woman to exact a promise from a son, daughter, wife, husband,

or friend, is cruel and unjust. Why should the one, on the verge of another world, know what is best for those left behind, or seek to bind them to what may be irreparably wrong. Your father acted for the best, but his judgment was shallow, and his exaction was a coward's."

"Miss Genny!"

"Mr. Neider, are you going to fritter away any more time over your foolish task?"

"Foolish!" I said, conscious that my temper was fading ungracefully away.

"Miss Genny is pleased to be abrupt."

"I beg your pardon. I forgot our early acquaintance."

"Pray, don't mention it."

"I am a hasty woman, and inclined to speak my mind. But then I am old enough to be your mother."

I could not help laughing at this.

"Some two years my senior at least, you say."

"And twenty-two in my knowledge of life."

"Really!" was my satirical response.

"You don't know what life is—yours has been a 'foggy idealism.'"

"Ah! you sting me with my own words."

"Will you go upstairs, if you please?" she said, severely; "I want to make quite sure you haven't set the chimney on fire."

"Will you not take my word for it?"

"No."

"Good night, miss."

She did not answer; she had moved towards the door that led into the farm-yard, and was coolly withdrawing the bolts.

"Stay a moment."

She flung the door wide and looked out. The dog came bounding towards her, but she put him aside with an abrupt "down, Nero!" looked round the yard for a moment, and then re-entered the kitchen and bolted the door again.

“Good night, Mr. Neider.”

“Is anything the matter?”

“Nothing.”

I went upstairs to my room, wherein William Grey was peacefully snoring. A hasty glance round assured me of the absence of my luggage, for which I had waited two days.

“Hollo here!” I exclaimed aloud, and a “Hollo there!” sounded from the bed-clothes, in the midst of which William Grey, with a very rough head of hair, loomed up and stared at me.

“What’s the row, Neider?”

“Nothing particular—I did not mean to wake you.”

“Oh! didn’t you?” said he, looking aggrieved; “well, it’s the second time I have been roused from my innocent rest. Were you in the yard just now?”

“No, but Miss Genny was.”

“Eh?”

I repeated my assertion.

"It couldn't have been Miss Genny though. I fancied perhaps you and Thirsk were up to your larks, and pitching all the loose gravel you could find at my window-panes."

"I was not in quite so facetious a mood, and Thirsk has been in his room this hour."

"So he has—well, perhaps it was a dream," he said with a yawn; "but what the deuce did you begin shouting for?"

"I missed my trunks."

"They're in Thirsk's room. Ipps took them there by mistake."

"I should like my portmanteau, if I thought this were one of Thirsk's sitting-up nights."

"He's rather proud of being a late bird. You may as well wake him up as the rest of us," he added drily.

After considering the matter for a moment, I took up my night-lamp and went on to the landing. A light tap at the door eliciting no response, I knocked somewhat louder, and

called his name through the key-hole. No answer following, I was about to turn away, when a suspicion of the stillness within being a little unnatural, led me to try the handle of the door. To my surprise the door opened to my touch—it had been hastily locked, but the bolt had not caught the hasp. My night-lamp lighted the room wherein the blundering Ipps had carefully piled my trunk and portmanteau,—lighted the empty room.

Nicholas Thirsk was not there !

CHAPTER VI.

BUYING A FRIEND.

MR. NICHOLAS THIRSK'S disappearance rendered me doubtful of my next step. I was perplexed at his absence, and at a loss to account for it. My first idea was to return to Grey, and put a few questions to him; the second to descend to the kitchen and ask Miss Genny if she had seen Mr. Thirsk—both of which ideas were soon abandoned.

After all, it might be—possibly was—but a mere freak of my new acquaintance; he had evinced more than once an eccentricity, either natural or feigned, and it would be

taking an unfriendly step to direct general notice to his temporary absence. I was not at Follingay Farm to act either as spy or informer, and I resolved to leave Mr. Thirsk to himself.

Still I *was* a little curious, and instinctively I crossed the room to the window, and looked out. Immediately beneath the window there sloped the tiled roof of an out-house attached to the farm kitchen, a drop from which to the farm-yard might be easily made. To a man as tall and as agile as Nicholas Thirsk it was equally as easy to re-ascend ; and if that gentleman were addicted to moonlight flittings, his anxiety to retain that particular room, and to make friends with one particular dog, was now readily accountable. Mr. Thirsk was a man with no small amount of forethought : I gave him credit for forethought, and did not call it craftiness—I had never been inclined to judge too hastily.

So I left Mr. Thirsk to himself ; he did not

cross my line of action, or interfere with my wishes. I had come for my portmanteau, and presumed I might take the liberty of conveying it to my own room during his absence; it was his own fault that he had not been there to grant me permission, or had not informed me of Ipps's mistake at an earlier hour.

I secured my portmanteau, repaired to my room, and, resisting the temptation to sit up an hour or two, and see what time Mr. Thirsk might consider it expedient to return, I extinguished my light and went to bed.

In the morning Mr. Thirsk rattled at my room door at an early hour.

"Sleepers, awake!" he cried; "here's Mr. Genny rampant below, and swearing we are bringing Follingay Farm into disrepute."

"What is the time?"

"Just six."

"Bless my soul, how I have slept!" said Grey, turning hastily out of bed. "Just

six!—I haven't been up so late since the winter."

We were down-stairs and in the fields half-an-hour afterwards. Mr. Genny looked cross and satirical at our tardy appearance.

"It's small farmers the three of ye will make," he said, "if ye go on at this rate. Perhaps some of ye don't sleep well," and I fancied he glanced rather sharply at Thirsk.

"I am not quite used to early hours, but I'm running gradually into the groove."

"Ay."

It seemed an "Ay" a trifle more significant than usual; but Thirsk appeared not to remark it, and Grey, who had an easy conscience, disregarded it.

Thirsk took the first opportunity of speaking to me alone that day.

"You were a late visitor to my room last night, Neider?"

"Ay," I answered, with what I con-

sidered a very good imitation of Mr. Genny's manner.

"You are pleased to be facetious this morning. The country air is freshening you up."

"I hope so."

"You wanted your portmanteau, and broke into my room to procure it."

"I am not in the habit of breaking in, nor breaking out of a room," was my response; "you had locked the door on the wrong side of the hasp."

"And you took advantage of it."

"And took off my portmanteau—exactly."

He looked steadily at me, almost impertinently, but I did not flinch from his gaze.

"You Germans and half-Germans," he said, "seem wondrously disregarding of the common rules of civilized life. Have you ever heard our proverb, that 'an Englishman's house is his castle'?"

"And an Englishman's room, too," I answered; "you are in the right, Mr.

Thirsk. And I knocked at that Englishman's room door for some time, before I took the liberty of trying its security."

"And echo only answering, enter Alfred Neider, like a thief in the night."

"Nicholas Thirsk having made an exit out of the window, like a thief with his booty," I retorted.

Thirsk wheeled round very fiercely, and regarded me again. I did not flinch from him, or feel daunted by his fierce looks. I was as tall as he, and certainly as strong.

"How do you know I went out of the window?"

"I guessed it."

"You guessed right for once," was the short answer; "but before old Genny was constituted your father-confessor, you might have made quite sure."

"I have confessed nothing to Mr. Genny, neither my sins nor your own," said I. "I am a half-German, you remember, and I fancy the Germans in general mind their

own business, rather more than the English."

"Oh! it's no secret—I make no secret of it," said Thirsk, carelessly; but I was convinced that his manner began to change from that instant. Before then he had been harsh in his comments, and inclined to quarrel; now he gradually assumed his usual mood.

"Neither your sins nor my own!" he said, commenting on my last speech; "I don't know what skeleton closet you may have, Neider, here or at home—but I am *sans peur et sans reproche*. If I go to my room at an infernally early hour, in accordance with the wishes of our liege lord, the farmer, I am not bound to stay there, in defiance of my own."

"Still you might as well have left home by the door."

"And had some one to sit up for me, and been lectured concerning late hours, and been preached at by a hooked-nose farmer for the remainder of the week. Weren't

you up late enough, reprobate, to be flirting in the kitchen with that farmer's daughter at eleven at night?"

"I don't understand flirting, Thirsk. And were I inclined to indulge in the art, I very much doubt if Miss Genny would second me."

"Oh! these farmer's daughters are exceedingly sly!"

"But she's a farmer's niece."

"Ah! I had forgotten. Well, you didn't flirt, but you talked of death-bed promises, and withered hopes, and other sentimentalities—like a couple of young doves, new-fledged from the Minerva press."

"Where were you?" I asked quickly.

"Close to the door, struggling to open that accursed, obstinate wicket to the left, which leads to the garden, and so *en route* to the high road, whereon one can smoke a cigar in peace, and enjoy the fresh air. Miss Genny nearly caught me, though."

And he laughed heartily at the reminiscence.

"If I were you, Thirsk, I would not try the window again."

"Why not?" was the response following quickly and sharply on my suggestion.

"Genny's a firm man, I should say, and might take the liberty of firing at a strange figure wandering about his premises at unreasonable hours. There's a good fowling-piece in his bed-room."

"Neider, I like danger. I would run into it at any time, for the pleasure of the excitement it causes. I am a child fond of playing with fire, though I have made up my mind that the flames shall not master me. I stick to the window till Mr. Genny objects, or you betray me, if it be only for the pleasure of dodging the farmer's gun."

"You will betray yourself shortly, if you amuse yourself with wandering to the back of the house, and flinging stones at my window."

Thirsk was silent several minutes. He walked by my side with his hands clasped behind him, studying the close turf of the meadow, across which we were wandering, under the impression that we were looking after the farm stock. He was silent so long that I thought he had forgotten the subject, till he said suddenly—

“It was a wild freak altogether—I must be a little more cautious, if I wish to keep my secret !”

“You object to mystery, too ?” I said, thinking of Miss Genny.

“Do I make a mystery of it ?” he asked ; “is there any mystery in smoking a cigar on the high road ?”

“Not much ; if you do not risk breaking your neck for your stroll.”

“I have risked breaking my neck fifty times for a more foolish object. What’s my neck worth ?” he added, with an intensity of bitterness that showed how variable were his thoughts, and even how unsettled his

mind; "who would give a crown for its preservation intact, and how many would double the *douceur* to hear it was broken! I stand in the crowd, with the world against me, Neider."

"Nonsense."

"I'm a poor man, and a poor man has no friends."

There was a hidden mournfulness that betrayed itself in the midst of the bitterness of his words, and I felt drawn towards him. In our first meeting he had exercised a certain power over me, which I withstood or concealed—the interest which he had awakened in me then had not died out. I felt that, if he were a rash man, he was a mistaken one; to a great extent his own enemy, and answerable for that peculiar position to which he seemed, at times, inclined to direct general attention.

Once or twice it had struck me that he was offering that past as an excuse for his present actions—whatever they might be,

or whithersoever they were leading him. That he was unsettled, even unhappy, I was to a certain extent convinced ; that he had been a different, perhaps a better man in the past—there was but little doubt.

“That is a morbid reasoning, Thirsk, which sets up poverty as a barrier to friendship. Poverty only tests the real friends, and sends the false to the shadows to which they naturally belong.”

“My friends are all in shadow-land then ; there was not a true one amongst the lot. Plenty of money to pay for plenty of drink, and, ye gods, what a myriad of honest fellows round me !”

“You don’t grieve at their loss, Thirsk ?”

“I never grieve—I give no thoughts to the yesterday or to the morrow—I am a free devil-may-care fellow. As for the old friends, I shall whistle them all back again twelve months hence.”

“How’s that ?”

“There’s only one way,” he said, care-

lessly; "for the present, let me be content with isolation."

"That will be your own fault, then."

"Do you think there is a man in the world would lend me five pounds?" he cried, mockingly; "come, I test your friendship, your good feeling. You, the rich man who are to inherit a fair farm and fat acres, and can afford to fling a hundred pounds away to learn the peddling tricks which the vulgar mind of Genny can teach you—I test you—do you hear?"

"Well?"

"Bulwer's hero, in his feigned poverty, asked for five pounds for a poor old nurse, and his friends turned away. I, in my real destitution, ask the same of a man who possibly has it to spare."

"Have I owned to much ready cash?"

"You have owned to nothing, that I can remember."

"Well, I will own to being far from a rich man, the heir to a very small farm, the

support of a very dear mother ; and there's my five pounds at your service."

And I took five sovereigns from my purse, and placed them in his hands.

He turned them over once or twice in his dark palm, irresolutely. I fancied that his face even changed colour, but it was momentary, if I were even right in my surmise.

"I did not expect it," he muttered.

"You are an unfair judge of human nature."

"I am run a little close—I'll take the loan," he said, "if I am not pressing you too hard?"

"I can spare five pounds," I replied.

He held his right hand towards me, and I shook hands with him. His grip was hard and earnest, and made me wince again.

"I count on *one* friend yet," he said meaningly.

"How soon we veer round!" cried I, laughing.

“The friendship of Nicholas Thirsk, gentleman scapegrace, bought for five pounds!” said he lightly; “Neider, some of these days—these early days, ere we country clodhoppers drink the harvest beer—I’ll tell you a story.”

But the harvest beer was drunk, the harvest moon went down later and later every night, before he told me. I had guessed one-half his secret ere he took me into confidence.

CHAPTER VII.

WELSDON CHURCH.

WHETHER Nicholas Thirsk still amused himself and whiled away the early hours by clambering in and out of his bedroom window, at unseasonable times, was a matter of some doubt. I did not seek to discover, and Thirsk offered no information.

Sunday morning came round in due course, and Genny presented himself at the breakfast-table furbished up for the occasion.

"Ye gents are going to church, I suppose," he asked, "with me and Mr. Grey?"

—and my niece,” he added, after a pause;
“it’s a good habit.”

“Surely it is something more than a habit, uncle?” gently replied Harriet.

“Ay,” he responded, “sure and it be. There’s a good pew of our’n for ye, lads, and the parson’ll think it odd if there’s much stopping away.”

“Mr. Neider seems to require a great deal of pressing,” said Thirsk with a laugh.

“I intend to go to church,” I said briefly. I was upon the point of adding that I was a regular church-goer, thanks to the careful teaching of my mother, when I thought that information was possibly uncalled for, and of a certainty only concerned my humble self.

“Ann Mr. Thirsk?” said Genny; “I’m incloined to think he woan’t want much pressing.”

“I’m a Dissenter.”

“Ay, ay—I didn’t know that.”

“I like a rousing sermon, and some good

thumping of cushions, and a hoarse voice bellowing at a poor sinner the most unutterable woe. That's the style, and beats the Church of England into fits."

Harriet Genny frowned a little over her breakfast cup. She was a staid girl, to whom such an exhibition of irreverence was painful. Still she kept her opinions to herself, which was more than her uncle did.

"If it worn't Sunday, I'd say, 'darned if that ain't a queer way of talking!'" remarked Genny; "and I'm of opinion, moind ye, that ye and my dog Nero are about the same style of religious sentiment."

"Nero's a good dog," was the cool response.

"Ay."

"My wardrobe hasn't arrived yet, or I would try church by way of a change," continued Thirsk; "but when my coat's somewhat seedy, my spotted blue choker in the box at home, and there remains no macassar

oil or fatty matter for a fellow's head, what's the use of setting up for a Christian?"

Mr. Genny, whose thin hair was certainly plastered to his head, and who wore a spotted "blue choker" himself, compressed his lips, and looked out of the corners of his little grey eyes at the speaker. Genny was of a temper the reverse of peaceful at times, and might have possibly responded, had not his niece created a diversion by rising.

"Then you do not accompany us, Mr. Thirsk?"

"My poverty, but not my will'—refuses."

"There's the bells a-ringing," commented Genny.

"What a hideous, cracked peal," said Thirsk; "surely a disgrace to these aristocratic quarters."

"Ay, they've talked of changing the bells more than once. There's a subscription ye can put your name doon for."

"That's worth knowing."

"Headed by Sir Richard Freemantle, Mr. Genny, and other aristocratic parties," said Genny, drily.

"Talking of Sir Richard—we shall see him at church this morning, I suppose?" said Grey.

"Noa—he was shaken up too much in the train, and be not yet presentable, I believe," said Genny; "but ye'll have a chance of seeing his sister for the first time in your loife. Now, gentlemen, if ye please, we'll be moving."

Grey and I seized our hats, and followed Mr. Genny through the farm-yard to the Welsdon road, along which Harriet Genny had already proceeded.

Etiquette sent me after Miss Genny, to whom I offered my arm, who thanked me, but declined the escort. Whether I looked discomfited or vexed, I know not, but Miss Genny said—

"You are in country quarters, remember, Mr. Neider. Half Welsdon would be telling

the other half, we were going to be married next week."

She said it in her usual brusque manner, with a lip that curled a little at Welsdon folk in general.

"I should not have thought you were one to study the world so closely, Miss Genny."

"I dislike to be talked about," was the quick response.

"Well, it's not pleasant," said I; "and if public opinion distresses you so much, why, I'll forego the pleasure."

"That is a bad imitation of Mr. Thirsk," she said.

"You don't admire Mr. Thirsk's manner?"

"Do you?"

"Not always—it perplexes me."

"Then why make an effort to imitate him."

"I beg pardon. I was not aware that I was attempting to copy a manner which

appears to have given you some offence."

"I never take offence—of a Sunday," she added, by way of correction.

I laughed, and she looked very indignantly towards me. Miss Genny was evidently of an irritable turn, and perhaps I *was* in one of Thirsk's aggravating moods, for I confess to a secret sort of pleasure I took in making her face flush, and in meeting the flash of her great hazel eyes. She looked prettier, too, when animated, and less grave, or sullen, or thoughtful, or whatever mood it might be that gave that impenetrable look to her face.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I hardly know—your reservation, I suppose, Miss Genny."

"You're aware we are going to church?"

"Oh! yes."

"I thought you had forgotten it."

"Why?"

"My idea is, that people proceeding to church should give some little thought with regard to the object that takes them thither. Only *my* idea, understand."

"That may be of consequence."

She looked at me again, but did not reply.

"I'm not satirical—pray don't misconstrue everything I say and do, Miss Genny—it is an idea of consequence, because it's the right idea."

"Don't make me forget it, then?"

"I'll say no more. Will you allow me to carry that prayer-book?"

It was a ponderous volume. An old-fashioned prayer-book, with a dark roan cover, weighing altogether a couple of pounds or more. Miss Genny was tenacious and suspicious—she would see a covert meaning in everything I said.

"You are laughing at this weighty book, Mr. Neider."

"Upon my honour, I am not."

"It was my mother's, sir."

"Upon my honour——" I repeated, seeing that she was troubled, but she would not allow me to finish my question, and turned back to speak to her uncle. She had her hand upon her uncle's arm the next moment, and I was left to Mr. Grey's society.

Grey looked at me with a sly expression, when we were a little distance behind Mr. Genny and niece.

"Been attempting the amiable, old fellow."

"I have been attempting that which I considered common politeness."

"Ah! Harriet Genny objects to politeness—so it didn't answer."

"I'm aware of it."

"And yet she is the best girl under the sun," said Grey, "or rather one of the best girls spoiled."

"What do you mean?"

"That farming life, a practical, unimaginative uncle, and a hard, busy existence, without companionship of her own age and sex,

have tended to spoil her and her temper," said Grey; "my idea is, that too much was placed in her hands after her mother's death—that she was brought here a girl of seventeen, and made Genny's housekeeper almost in spite of herself."

"In spite of herself?" said I; "she seems attached to her uncle."

"Oh! yes, and he's attached to her. But their natures are exactly opposite, and—here's the church, and—by George, here's Thirsk!"

"Of course he is," said Thirsk behind us. "Look alive, young men—the five minute bell is just done, and I wouldn't miss a word of the service for forty shillings."

We were nearing Welsdon Church; a little stone edifice, with ivy covering its walls, and trailing over its lancet windows, and making a way slowly and surely up the sturdy church tower, whence had wrung out the peal of bells which Mr. Thirsk had criticized. The white country road was

dotted with a few late villagers in their Sunday's best, hurrying like ourselves to church, through the doors of which Mr. Genny led the way. An oaken pew, as time-worn and notched as an old carpenter's bench; of square dimensions, and full of unwieldy dropsical hassocks, over which it was a general rule to stumble, before a final settlement.

Being a square pew, the seats were fixed on all sides save the door, consequently two rows of inmates faced each other, omnibus fashion, and looked like a private party enjoying themselves after a dismal fashion of their own. These little parties were dotted all over the church, and separated by a long line of free seats in the centre of the middle aisle; amidst these seats I noticed Mr. Ipps, in a gorgeous velvet waistcoat, the old lady who had fetched Mr. Ricksworth home from the Haycock Inn, and the young lady who had pulled my hair.

A fine old church, albeit of small dimen-

sions, was this antique church of Welsdon—the resort of antiquarians, architects, and artists out on a sketching tour, and those ubiquitous photographists whom you meet everywhere now, even on the top of Mount Blanc. The organ pealed forth, and recalled my attention to matters less mundane; and Mr. Genny, turning round from a somewhat formal sprawl on his knees, with his head in his hat, looked in no small degree astonished at the propinquity of Nicholas Thirsk.

“Ay!” I heard him mutter under his breath, before clearing his throat for the first verse of the morning hymn.

The service began, and a very feeble old white-haired gentleman, in a voice more weak and feeble than even his appearance warranted, began to read after the first hymn. A dull, inane kind of reading, which soon exerted a soporific effect on the hard-workers in the free seats—the farm labourers and village worthies, who had come with a


good motive, or in deference to the wishes of their better halves—and the frequency of head-noddings and head-jerkings right and left, and backwards and forwards, had a peculiar effect, and made one dizzy. At the end of the first lesson of the day, there was a general wake up of the congregation; wheels grated on the gravel drive outside, the beadle flung back the doors, the palsied pew-opener dropped her prayer-book, in her flurry to open the door of a pew near the pulpit, and half-a-dozen youths in smock frocks shuffled their hob-nailed boots with suppressed excitement. Harriet Genny and Mr. Grey were about the two most unconcerned in the sacred edifice; Nicholas Thirsk possibly the most curious. So curious that he very coolly stepped over the hassock into my place, as the congregation rose for the *Te Deum Laudamus*.

“Here’s the cream of Welsdon in the Woods, and the accomplished baronet’s

sister, Neider. Keep your eyes open," he whispered.

I was frowning a rebuke at him, when a tall, thin, high-shouldered man, with a bloodless face, and a strip of black plaster meandering across the bridge of his nose and left eye-brow, came into church in a stiff-backed manner, followed by a pale-faced, sharp-featured girl of eighteen or nineteen. There was general attention to the new-comers, and little attention to the psalm—country eyes distended, and the lower jaws of three-fourths of the congregation dropped with wonder. The clerk under the reading-desk left off his sepulchral bass, and remained open-mouthed; and even the clergyman looked inclined to exclaim, "How d'ye do, Sir Richard? Glad to see you back again in England, and not so much hurt as people supposed."

Sir Richard paused at his pew, and allowed his sister to precede him; then followed, and took his seat close to the door,



—so close that the pew-opener shut the tails of his coat in, and had to be beckoned back, and reproved in a husky whisper. But the excitement finally subsided, and save a few whose curiosity was not likely to be satiated till one o'clock, general attention became directed to the morning service.

I was somewhat surprised to witness the great degree of reverence exhibited by Mr. Thirsk after the appearance of the Free-mantles—the rigid attention to his book, and the strict observance to religious forms. He imitated Mr. Genny in a great degree, and knelt amongst the hassocks when necessary, in a corner of the pew, and buried his face even in his arms.

During the first hymn Sir Richard Free-mantle's head turned in his stiff cravat, and a pair of small grey eyes took stock of his many dependents and tenants sprinkled about the church. I was looking in his direction, when his face turned suddenly towards us, and the

inmates of our pew became the objects of his especial attention. I shall not forget the change on that hitherto statuesque countenance—the rush of blood to the face, the surprised look of the eyes, the nervous clutch of a gloved hand to the door of his pew. Nicholas Thirsk was standing by my side, was nearest the aisle, and I fancied must be the object at which the baronet stared so hard, despite the unmoved features of my fellow-pupil in farming. Thirsk looked straight before him at the minister, and sang his loudest from the hymn-book in his hand, and took no heed of the attention his presence appeared to create. One or two in the free seats, who had never grown tired of watching the movements of the magnate of the village, looked towards Thirsk also, after the baronet's exhibition of astonishment, and perceiving Thirsk's abstraction, favoured me with their notice, and thought, probably, that they had found the right one at last.

But Sir Richard's surprise was soon over ; his eyes wandered round the church—right round to the organ-loft over the entrance door, and back by the side aisle on his extreme left, till they were level with his own pew again, and his sister within it, at whose bonnet he stared for a moment before turning his attention to the gilt-edged hymn-book in his hand ; that book from which he never again raised his eyes, which he held open during the sermon, thereby personally offending his particular friend, the rector of Welsdon church.

A dreary, flat, unprofitable sermon—a satire in its delivery, and in him who delivered it, on church preachers and church preferments—muttered by a toothless old gentleman, whose age rendered him unfit for every office under heaven, more especially for that great, grand one which is considered in this age such a capital business speculation. There were not twenty

people awake in the church, and the heavy snoring of Mr. Ipps, a few seats in the rear, had more than once to be checked by a spiteful nudge in his side from the pew-opener.

The sermon was concluded at five minutes past one—bad preachers are fond of long sermons—and Sir Richard Freemantle and his sister were the first to depart. No one in the church had moved—no one would have been so deficient in politeness as to have preceded the lord of the manor. Had any unruly lads made a dash for the sunshine outside in the old graveyard, they would have been collared by an indignant beadle, and well shaken for their breach of decorum. A general clicking of pew-locks after Sir Richard had advanced a few paces, and then the organ playing a lively kind of march,—as if by way of compliment to Sir Richard, and symbolical of the good spirits of his tenantry,—and the congregation flowing on at the heels of the *élite*.

Coming out of church not a few of the congregation were surprised to find the carriage still waiting, Miss Freemantle ensconced therein, the red silk blinds drawn down, and Sir Richard himself, very erect and starchy, standing under the carved stone porch.

Thirsk had his hand upon my arm ; I felt it suddenly withdrawn, then as suddenly replaced.

"What does it matter ?" he muttered—"sooner or later it must come."

The watchful little eyes of the baronet singled out Nicholas Thirsk as we emerged into the churchyard.

"Mr. Thirsk," said the baronet, advancing, "I wish to speak with you."

"I have nothing to say to you, Sir Richard," was the haughty response.

"But, sir, I have something to say to *you*."

"Our ways are different ; our thoughts are not in common ; there is no love lost

between us—why should I pay deference to *your* wishes ? ”

“ What are you doing in Welsdon ? ”

“ Learning an honest business—is that strange ? ”

“ You are here for a motive—the old foolish wilful motive, don’t deny it ! ”

“ You are welcome to believe what you please, sir. ”

“ You must leave here—do you hear ? ”
said the baronet.

“ Isn’t this village large enough for you and me ? ”

“ It is not. ”

“ Then go, ” almost shouted Thirsk, stamping on the gravel in his rage ; “ I have been hunted to the death by you—and I will not stir again ! ”

They were the only words that could have been caught up by the curious crowd ; question and answer, sting and retort, had been whispered cautiously, if harshly, and Thirsk’s elevated voice surprised

the baronet even more than the anxious congregation. He turned away with a strange embarrassed look, and entered the carriage, from which one pale face, shadowed by light flaxen ringlets, looked for a moment hastily.

“So let him go, and my curse go with him to his death!”

“Thirsk! Thirsk!” I cried.

“I am a beggar, and that man is answerable for my low estate. He shall remember it some day.”

“It is strange!”

“Yes. For the present leave it strange—some day I will make a clean breast of it.”

The carriage whirled away to the Hall; the crowd of church folk streamed its divers ways; the new generation went stepping over the graves of the old; the birds darted in and out of their nests in the ivy; the organ in the old church pealed harmoniously forth into the flower-scented air.

A peaceful, picturesque scene enough—type of a hundred thousand similar in our English villages on a Sabbath-day—so like to this, and yet so different!

For, from the portals of God's house will step the dark thoughts to the sunshine—unmoved by the holy teaching within the temple, passes out to the world, some child of that darkness, wherein envy and hatred are nursed. Here and there a simple, guileless heart, but here and there a thoughtless, reckless being, such as he whose arm was linked within my own.

With thoughts that were stern and manifold, and concerning which I knew little, went Nicholas Thirsk. That they *were* stern thoughts, boding no good, I could judge by his face. A more decisive, cruel-looking face I had not glanced at, until that troubled hour which was upon him then.

"Where's Genny?" he said, looking round.

"They were not with us—they have heard nothing."

"And I can trust you?"

"Yes."

"There shall soon be no secrets between you and me, Neider. I think you will be my one friend, after all."

"If I might offer you some little help—advise you just a little, for your good."

"Neider, old fellow, there *was* good in me four years ago—but it was starved out of me!"

I shall never forget his look.

BOOK II.

"To be Hitters."

"Under the rose, there was a gentleman
Came in at the wicket."

CHAPMAN.

"Is this your sweetheart? I had need wish you much joy, for I see but a
little towards."

HEYWOOD.

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CHAPTER I.

THE CASTLE RUINS.

It was an early harvest that year. A good harvest, at which farmers rubbed their hands, and the papers congratulated the general public; for which people, extra grateful, returned thanks in church, and from which people in Mark Lane made their ten and twenty thousand pounds, and never thought of thanking anybody. A good harvest in the county of which Welsdon in the Woods formed a portion, and Mr. Genny with nothing to complain of.

Mr. Genny never owned to a successful season, lest his friends and neighbours

should want to borrow a little money on the strength of it; it was never more than "tolerably fair," and Mr. Genny deposited his money in the County Bank, and turned with renewed vigour to his land.

Mr. Genny worked us hard that harvest season, and if learning the farming consisted in slaving like negroes in the field, and getting one's hands as hard as iron, Mr. Grey and I made rapid progress in the profession we had chosen. Mr. Thirsk was variable in his attention to business, and Mr. Genny had long since despaired of making a farmer of him.

"It's a question of boarding ye for six or eight months for forty poonds," he grumbled one day when Thirsk pleaded a headache, and refused to stir an inch beyond the farm-house, "for its deevilish little use ye are to me, or credit to yeerself."

"Patience, my good sir, patience!"

"Ay, I want it."

"I'm not obliged to serve you like one of

your miserable farm labourers, I presume."

"Ye're not expected to idle your time away," said Genny, shortly.

"Good morning, sir!"

And Thirsk walked coolly up-stairs.

"I'll gie him his forty pounds back!—I'll gie him his forty pounds back!" cried Genny, with a stamp of both feet; "and I woonder," suddenly turning to me, "what *you* can find in him to make such a friend of."

I did not feel called upon for a reply. I hardly knew even then whether Thirsk was a friend of mine, or considered me a friend. If he objected to mystery, he was none the less an enigma to me.

"See if I don't gie him his forty pounds back," said Genny, for the third time, as he hurried away to his fields; but although my stay exceeded Thirsk's by many months, I was never summoned as witness to the transfer.

Mr. Genny's tempers were not so variable

after the harvest was in, and all the nomadic tribes of reapers paid off. There was a lull in the bustle at the farm, and the farmer could smoke his pipe composedly, and not worry his pupils too much with his orders. William Grey still talked of going, and was only waiting the commands of his father the silversmith, he said ; but though he received many letters from home, the commands were not included therein, or he never mentioned them if they were.

“When are you going over Welsdon Castle, Neider?” said Grey to me one fine Saturday afternoon ; “it’s a pity to lose a sight of the ruins this fine weather. When the wet season comes, the grounds are a trifle too sloppy.”

“Are they open to visitors every day?”

“Only twice a week—Wednesdays and Saturdays,” suggested Grey.

“When will you be at liberty to show me the wonders of the place?”

"I'm—I'm going that way to-day, if you feel inclined to accompany me."

"Willingly. Shall we ask Thirsk?"

"N—no. I think he would only refuse, and I don't like being said 'No' to. Besides, I don't know where he is."

"After all those reasons—let us be off."

Grey coloured a little. He had never taken kindly to Thirsk, although he had not cared to own his objections to much of satire and acrimony with which his fellow-pupil had favoured him. He owned them that day, however, as we strolled along the country road. His was a frank nature, that spoke out.

"Thirsk isn't a fellow after my own heart," he said suddenly, "or we should have been stanch friends long since. I think I must have done something early in life to offend him."

"It's only his way."

"And a confounded unpleasant way it is," he commented; "although I have be-

come used to it now, and don't let it affect me. You don't happen to know if he be a nabob in disguise, Neider?"

"Why should I know more than yourself?"

"Well," with a peculiar intonation in his voice, that was the only sign of a difference in his equable temper, "he takes to you a little. You're about the only one on the Farm he doesn't look at disparagingly. I wonder, now, what there is in you?"

And he broke into his hearty laugh, and threw his jealous symptoms overboard.

"I'm sure I cannot say, Grey," returned I, in the same light tone; "and I don't plead guilty to encouraging the attentions of Mr. Thirsk."

"Well," said he, passing his hands through his curly hair, after his usual habit, and sending his hat on one side, where he left it, "he's a man I can't make out exactly—not that that matters to him or me much. But if he would just stand a little less upon

ceremony, it would be a trifle more comfortable. For he can be a 'jolly good fellow ;' once or twice last week he showed he had only to try."

"We'll not judge him too hastily, Grey."

"No, that's not fair," answered Grey ; "and perhaps he's crossed in love—who knows?"

"Ah ! who knows?"

"I don't think, if I were ever crossed in love," he said, with a solemnity that made me smile, "I should be so confoundedly disagreeable over it."

"Are you a philosopher?"

"Nothing like one—wouldn't be one if I could."

"May I ask how you would bear the full brunt of a disappointment of a tender nature?"

"Grin and bear it, my boy!" he cried ; "and when I couldn't bear it, lock myself and my troubles in some dusty top room,

until I was quite presentable to general society."

"Spoken like a philosopher, at least."

"I daresay I should be attacked with the worst sensations; for upon my word, though you mayn't believe it, I'm not a hard-hearted young man."

"May your course of true love run as smoothly as that brook," I said, as we crossed a bridge at this juncture.

"Thank you, Neider—when the time comes, let us hope so. And the same to you in a similar mess."

I laughed.

"For your time will come, I suppose, although I can't see the woman that's fit for you."

"What sort of woman would you recommend, Grey?"

"Well—I call you a kind of hard-headed chap, who requires to be in hot-water now and then, to bring forth all his virtues. I hardly know what young lady would suit

you—" he said, reflectively, "it's a toss up between a doll and a spitfire."

"Upon my word, you're complimentary."

"Oh! I know you won't take offence, and it's a treat to be able to speak one's mind now and then," said he; "I fancy Miss Genny would be a fit and proper companion, if somebody else wasn't after her."

"Who's that?"

"Ah, lad! how sharp we are!"

"Don't be alarmed, Grey—I'm not falling in love with Miss Genny."

"All the better for you—for there's a long-moustached, bullet-headed young swell after her, I fancy."

"*You* fancy?"

"Miss Genny don't make me her confidant, and one can't pump much out of the uncle. But if she don't take to her cousin Robin, it's odd if there isn't a little sneaking on his part—so, if your heart's touched, keep your eyes open."

“ My heart’s bullet-proof.”

“ Or arrow-proof, eh ? ” rejoined Grey.
“ Alf Neider, you’re a boaster—and, like all of the bombastic order, will be the first to go to the wall. And, talking about walls, here’s the ruins ! ”

And a picturesque ruin was Welsdon Castle—time-worn and ivy-grown, and with its stout walls rent in many places. Rumour said that that pile of stonework on the fair green slope had been built by hands that came over with the Cæsars ; and if so, the place was a credit to its builders, and spoke of a knowledge of the best material, which present Government contractors have unhappily missed. The castle stretched over a fair expanse of ground, and the two round towers at the entrance-gates had roofs to them yet, and even half a staircase which finished abruptly in mid-air and stone-crop. A stout oaken door, studded with huge nails, formed the entrance to the castle, although entrance might have been made in

fifty places, and was made by Sir Richard Freemantle's sheep, on non-visiting days. But at the oaken door visitors were expected to enter, in a proper manner, and sign their names in a book kept for the purpose; and be shown round the great grass-plot, and told to look down the well, that had been dried up four hundred years; and requested not to touch the old font, which had been excavated in Sir Richard's own time, and at his own expense. For Sir Richard was a lover of antiquities, and proud of his bits of stone, and accustomed to muse on the good old times, amongst the landmarks left by Cæsar's tag-rag.

As we wound our way up the broad gravel road that led to the entrance-gates, we came upon Sir Richard Freemantle himself, and had been warned of his presence some minutes before, by his voice responding coldly and distinctly to a second voice, more hoarse and guttural, and more vociferous.

There was no intention of listening to the conversation, but there was little chance of evading it, save by leaping a dry ditch which had once communicated with the dry moat that skirted the castle walls. If there had been any wish to keep the discussion secret, their voices would not have rung so loudly in the summer air. It was a mere wrangle about a situation ; the stranger applying for one being less courteous and servile than are place-seekers in general.

“Try me agin, Sir Richard, and see what an honest fellow a few good words will make me.”

“You have been tried, and found wanting.”

“Ah, and so may greater people than I when their time’s come, my old woman says—we shall be awful light in the scales when the lot of us are lumped together, she says—baronets and all,” he added, with a short laugh.

“Have you anything more to say ? ”

"I hope I've said enough to remind you how hard I'm druv, Sir Richard?"

"Your own doings—why offer them as an excuse to *me*?"

"You're a gentleman, and don't understand what druving be."

"I have my own idea concerning it."

"And you won't have me?"

"Never again."

"Will you give me a crown—an old servant?"

"I never give money away, on principle."

"It's a damned hard principle, Sir Richard."

"I have found it answer very well. Good day, Ricksworth."

"I should have thought, for my darter's sake——"

"Don't argue any more—there's a good fellow. I am pressed for time, and you weary me. Your daughter is a good servant and a modest girl, and suits my housekeeper, I

am told—you should be more a credit to her.”

“Luck’s agin me—you’re agin me too, like all the world, save her, p’raps. She stands by me yet, however much the people about here may tell you and your belongings what a wretch her father is.”

“I hear nothing concerning you.”

“And will do nothing for me?”

“Nothing.”

“Why not?”

“I have answered;” and Sir Richard Freemantle turned away, and was proceeding towards the castle, when we came in sight of the late speakers—in one of whom, a burly, ill-clad, swarthy-looking ruffian, I recognized the man I had seen at the Haycock Inn. He stared at us, somewhat insolently and defiantly, as we noted a pantomimic shake of his clenched fist at the back of the baronet.

“Well, *gentlemen*,” he sneered as we came up.

"A fine day, Mr. Ricksworth," said Grey, politely.

"For fine folks," he added; "to a scamp like me, all days are about the same, Mr. Grey."

"What's wrong this morning, Ricksworth?"

"I've been trying for a living, and that starchy devil yonder won't give me a chance."

"You should try London."

"Oh! they're too particular there; last time I was there they locked me up, and—cut my hair," he added, with a grin that displayed a set of enormous white tusks; "p'raps they improved my morals, for I want to earn a penny in an honest manner, and all the doors are slapped in my face, and be cussed to 'em! He's as bad as my own close-fisted brother-in-law—cuss him too, with my compliments!"

"Well, good day," said Grey, stepping out to rejoin me, who had gone on slowly.

Ricksworth was at his side again. His insolent air had vanished—there was the whine of a professional beggar in his voice.

“ You’ve been a good friend to me once or twice, Mr. Grey, though I mayn’t have been the most grateful—if you’d only lend me a bit of silver till Saturday night, when my wife gets in her washing bills.”

“ Here’s an odd sixpence,” and it was spun towards him.

“ Thankee, thankee—you won’t say anything about this to the girl up at the gate; she mayn’t like it, and it makes words.”

“ All right.”

“ Then good day to you, and your stiff-necked young friend. And Gord bless you, Mr. Grey—perhaps I can do you a turn some day. I nusses my goods with my bads—it’s all here ! ”

And he tapped his villainous forehead as he turned on his heel.

Sir Richard was waiting for us at the

gates. His thin bony hand had not yet been extended to ring the bell-handle on his left. As we advanced, he veered suddenly round and looked intently at me. Grey touched his hat, but he took no notice of the salutation.

“You are late visitors to the castle, gentlemen,” he said; “four is the hour we generally suppose to end all public visits.”

He rang the bell, and muttered something about his doubts as to whether the gatekeeper had gone home or not. The doubts were speedily dissipated by the door swinging back on its rusty hinges, and by Mercy Ricksworth appearing in the aperture, with not so bright and laughing a face as she had worn at the Farm, but with a shade less colour on her cheeks, and a pair of swollen eyelids, as though she had been crying.

“These gentlemen wish to see over the castle,” said Sir Richard very courteously, waiting for us to precede him through the gate, an act of deference which we did not

avail ourselves of, till he said in his usual cold tones,

“I am not going in yet.”

We entered, and Mercy Ricksworth pointed to a bulky volume, placed on an oaken slope affixed to the wall, and offered a pen to William Grey, with a smile that she tried in vain to repress.

“What’s the matter, Mercy?” asked Grey, looking hard into her face.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t tell me nothing—you have been crying.”

“Oh! I often cry, Mr. Grey—I’ve plenty to cry for.”

“That father of yours, he——”

“Please don’t say anything about *him*,” and the girl’s face flushed, and she gave an impatient wave of her hands towards the visitors’ book; “sign, sir. It’s a rule here to sign.”

“I beg your pardon—I hope I haven’t.”

Mercy went to the slope, and opened the

book with an impetuous hand, whilst Grey stood watching her, and rubbing the back of his ear with the feather of the pen.

"Would you like to sign first?" suggested Grey.

"After you."

"Would you——?"

"For Heaven's sake, look sharp," cried I, petulantly; "there's Sir Richard glowering at us through the doorway still."

Grey made a dash at the visitors' book, dipped his pen in the ink-horn affixed to the wall, and commenced writing. An instant afterwards, the little hand of Mercy Ricksworth passed over the paper, and made an ugly smear of his penmanship.

"Hollo!" cried Grey, picking up his pen, which had been knocked out of his hand by Miss Ricksworth's manœuvre.

"You know I will not have this—that I have said so half a dozen times, Mr. Grey. If you are so fond of visiting these ruins, write your proper name, sir."

"But I *did* write John Jones last time, Mercy."

"You'll never do it again."

"Ah, you are hard upon me, to-day."

And very submissively the son of the silversmith wrote William Grey under the smear, then, giving the pen to me, he walked towards the large grass plot in the centre. I signed my name beneath Grey's, and then almost unconsciously turned over a leaf or two of the volume. It was a hasty glance, but I saw at least thirty or forty William Greys occurring at regular intervals, and on the last page some ten or twelve Robert Lacklands, written in a small sharp hand, that reminded me of Thirsk's calligraphy, of which I had seen a few specimens.

I followed Grey to the grass-plot.

"I was not aware you were so constant a lover of the antique, Grey?"

"They're such fine ruins, you see."

"Yes, I see."

I must have responded somewhat drily, for Grey looked nervously, almost eagerly, towards me.

"I have taken to smoking lately, and it's astonishing how a fellow can enjoy a cigar in this quiet old relic of the by-gones."

"I fancy I should grow tired of too many visits, unless there were some attraction not quite so antique to lure me hither."

Grey reddened very much, and cut at the long rank grass with a little walking cane he carried.

"Shall we require the guide?" I inquired.

"No," said Grey; "it's a pity to take her out of her way, and it's a long pull round the ruins, and I know all about them by heart. I daresay, just where we are standing, many a tournament has been held, Neider."

"Probably."

"For the place wasn't dismantled till Henry the Seventh's time, and then there was a flare-up and a regular siege, and they

kept the king so long outside, that, when he did enter, he knocked the place to pieces out of spite. A spiteful beggar, that Henry the Seventh."

"Yes."

"What are you looking at now?" he inquired, a little irritably.

"I am wondering what possible interest Sir Richard Freemantle can take in our signatures."

"He's a curious mortal, I believe. Come on."

Turning my back on the baronet, who was standing before the visitors' book, studying its open pages, with Mercy at his side, carelessly swinging a key on her little finger, I accompanied Grey round the ruins.

There was little else save the mere shell of what had once been a noble pile of architecture—here and there the towers were more perfect, and at the extremity of the castle still remained a mass of crumbling

stone-work, by which one could see the size and altitude of the rooms that had been there once upon a time.

"The people learned in these ruins say this part of the place was built many centuries later by a Norman baron," said Grey,—"at all events, it's in a fair state of preservation. Do you see the timbers in the wall still?"

"Yes."

"Do you see that staircase breaking out of a hole in the wall up there, thirty feet high?—that was a secret passage to a secret room, where prisoners and papers were stowed till both grew musty. I went up there once myself."

"How did you manage that foolhardy exploit?" I inquired.

"By groping along a musty kind of drain on my hands and knees to the left here—somewhere here, but it's nearly choked up with leaves now—till I came to the steps built inside the wall, and so up to

that hole, where the grass looks like a shock head of hair. I was rather nervous when I felt the steps shaking under my feet—but old Ricksworth dared me, and his daughter was laughing—and so up I went.”

“To please an old ruffian and his coquettish daughter.”

“She isn’t coquettish!” cried Grey, warmly—“there isn’t a better-hearted girl in the world. Oh! Neider, you should have seen her turn as white as a sheet when I clambered to that slit in the wall. It was worth all the trouble.”

“That is a matter of opinion,” said I; “I shouldn’t care to risk my neck without a fair object in prospective.”

“It’s not so very dangerous. Old Ricksworth used to do it when he was my age, he tells me.”

“Don’t believe all you are told.”

“And Sir Richard went up there once.”

“Sir Richard!” I exclaimed.

“Oh! he'll go anywhere for a bit of an old brick, or a choice specimen of Roman cement. He gave a lecture at the town-hall last year on some quart pots and a bad six-pence that were dug out of My Lady's Chamber—this is My Lady's Chamber.”

“Oh! is it?”

“You looked tired,” said Grey; “I'm boring you.”

“Not at all,” I responded; “I was only thinking what a strange lady's chamber it is now, and trying to people it with the lady and *her* ladies-in-waiting, and the silken-clad pages, and the eternal greyhound basking in the great fire that once burned here.”

“You are imaginative, Mr. Neider,” said a voice behind me; and both of us, turning round, beheld Sir Richard Freemantle at our side.

“I have been, Sir Richard,” I replied, taken a little aback by his sudden address.

"It is a gift for which to be grateful—sometimes I wish my own brain was not so dusty, or hard, or matter-of-fact. Could I speak to you alone a moment?"

"Certainly."

Sir Richard looked hard at Mr. Grey, who took the hint and departed, with a puzzled expression of countenance.

"You are the Mr. Neider who signed his name in the visitors' book this afternoon?"

"The same, sir."

"And a friend of Mr. Thirsk's?"

"I am a fellow-pupil with him at Mr. Genny's farm."

"Not a friend?" he repeated.

"As the term goes, probably I am his friend. I take an interest in him; I am very frequently his companion."

"You were with him at church one Sunday, when he did not expect to see me."

"I was with him at church, Sir Richard."

"He has not attended church since. I presume he is still at Follingay Farm?"

I answered in the affirmative.

Sir Richard scratched some hieroglyphics amongst the grass and bits of stones at his feet, and glanced at me askance.

"You and I are strangers. I cannot expect you to answer every question with which I may trouble you."

"Hardly, sir."

"Still, I would ask, leaving you to reply or not, as you may think fit, has Mr. Thirsk spoken of me as his enemy—his implacable and inveterate enemy?"

I did not answer.

"I will not press—I have no right to press the question," he said; "but I am an honourable man, who has a right to defend his own actions. All my life I have given Nicholas Thirsk the best advice."

"Mr. Thirsk has only once spoken of you, Sir Richard," I answered, "and in the heat

of passion, when a fair judgment is not anticipated."

"It is an evasive answer," said he, quietly; "but it will do."

I felt my face flush, and a response, somewhat satirical and stinging, rise to my lips; but the man was earnest, and had a right to defend his good name. He was a persevering man also, and not inclined to drop the subject, or my company.

"I have always given him the best advice," he said again, "and he has always turned from me with a taunt or a curse—the way of the world, and nothing to distress me, possibly."

"It depends whether Mr. Thirsk's welfare is a matter of importance to you or not."

"His welfare is nothing to me now; the welfare of those likely to be influenced by his actions is everything—*everything*," he repeated with great emphasis.

He scratched amongst the stones again, and remained so long silent, that, with a

slight elevation of my hat, I was turning to depart, when he said hastily—

“Don’t go, Mr. Neider, I wish to say a little more.”

I waited for his further cross-examination, resolving in my mind the best method of implying that such a series of questions was objectionable.

“Mr. Neider,” he said at last, as if he were divining my thoughts, “I wish you to inform Mr. Thirsk that I have met you and asked these questions. I have no occasion to play the spy,” he added, with no little *hauteur*.

“You relieve my mind, sir.”

“Tell Mr. Thirsk, if you please, also, that if he has come to Welsdon with any motive foreign to that which is apparent to you and his friends, that such a motive must inevitably fail. I do not fear his power or his scheming, but I object to his persistence—his annoyance. May I solicit this favour of you?”

"You may, sir ; Mr. Thirsk shall be apprised of your communication."

He regarded me very attentively for some moments.

"Yours is a frank face; it is strange that that misguided young man—ever his own enemy—should have chosen you for a friend, perhaps a confidant?"

"I am not his confidant, Sir Richard."

"There will come a time—there must—when his rash schemes will recoil upon himself, and his fine castle in the air be as much a ruin as the walls that now surround us."

He muttered this to himself rather than to me, and, with a "good morning," I left the baronet amongst the ruins he was gazing at.

Years afterwards, when schemes had recoiled upon the busy brains that framed them, and schemes that had been successful had turned to dust and ashes, I stood in the ruins of My Lady's Chamber with Sir Richard Freemantle. What a different

scene to that time, and what an end and moral to all scheming, and what a change in all of us!

CHAPTER II.

MATTERS TENDER.

I FOUND William Grey standing under the gateway, in earnest discourse with Mercy Ricksworth. An animated discourse, that heightened the colour on his cheeks, and whitened the young portress's.

"Don't come again, Mr. Grey—I would rather you would not come so often here."

"But, Mercy——"

She turned to me as I came up, and asked a little imperiously,

"Has Sir Richard been speaking of me, or of any—of any one who comes here, Mr. Neider?"

"Sir Richard has not alluded once to present company, Miss Ricksworth."

She regarded me with a doubtful expression for an instant, then she said,

"I can believe you—I can believe you!"

"Upon my word, I am very much obliged to you."

Hers was an April nature, that a word might influence—she gave a merry laugh at my response.

"You don't look a sly young man, like ——" she paused, and coloured, and laughed again.

I felt inclined to be quite proud of my countenance—which, by-the-way, I had long had an idea verged a trifle too close on the platter species—Sir Richard had plainly owned, and the portress had indirectly confessed, that mine was a face that fairly told its story. Surely I had a right to be conceited on a matter which concerned me so deeply.

After bidding Mercy Ricksworth good

day, I stood hesitating at the gate, which she held open for me. It was usual in such visits to reward the custodian of antiquities ; but she was the niece of the man I served, and occasionally visited the Farm as a guest. Still she was poor, and perhaps the support of her father, and my fingers strayed in the direction of my waistcoat pocket.

“Pray don’t, Mr. Neider,” she said, colouring again ; “I would rather not, if you please. I haven’t shown you over the ruins, and I—I do not mean to take your money.”

She looked very decisive, and I did not press the point. With a good day, I took my departure over the little bridge that spanned the deep, dry moat, and joined William Grey, standing in a very disconsolate manner amidst the long grass by the high road.

“Come on—what a time you have been !” he said, irritably.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting !”

"Umph!"

"What's the matter, Grey?"

"Oh, nothing! Nothing more the matter with me than there ever has been, than there ever will be. Drop the subject!"

"Dropped accordingly."

"What a confounded dry, heavy-headed fellow you are!" he said, indignantly; "there's no life in you yet. Ah! my fine fellow, wait till you're full blown!"

I burst into a hearty laugh at this. His fierce looks could not check my hilarity and finally he softened and laughed heartily also.

"There will come a time, Alf Neider," he cried, "when the German stoic will melt, and the sensations be a little too much for you. Wait till you are as old as I am."

"Till that time, O Nestor, leave me in the enjoyment of my own sober senses."

"Neider, you won't tell *that* Thirsk?" he asked, very suddenly.

"I'm not aware that I have anything to tell him."

"No, but you will have," he said; "I'm going to make you my father confessor, old boy. I can't keep bursting with my secrets any longer."

"Oh!—more secrets!"

"You're the world," said he; "I look upon you as the hard world, listening to the romance and fancy of the young fool whose wise teeth have been cut, and left him as silly as ever. I own I'm silly, you know."

"But you are not."

"What am I, then?"

"One of the best-hearted fellows under the sun—possibly with a heart a trifle too big for the sceptical world which is about to listen to your maunderings."

"Complimentary and uncomplimentary, and all in a lump," said he; "but now to business."

"Ye—es."

He linked his arm with mine, and began walking at a headlong pace, against which I was compelled to remonstrate, that sultry afternoon.

"Only to get the steam up," explained Grey; "now, are you ready?"

"Quite ready."

"And prepared for anything?"

"Yes."

"I'm in love with Mercy Ricksworth!"

He stared hard into my face to watch the result of that revelation, of which I had had my suspicions long since, and was then fully prepared for.

"Well, aren't you surprised?"

"Not very."

"Isn't it an awful idea, calculated to disgrace me in the eyes of my family, afford me a chance of a disinheritance, throw me into an ignoble sphere, and pester me with illiterate relations? I put this to you, for you are the world, that knows not what sentiment means."

"It is an illusion—naturally will come to nothing."

"Not if I can help it."

"Your thoughts will change—your——"

"Neider, I never change!"

And Grey turned to me with a firmness, a hardness on his countenance, that reminded me of Nicholas Thirsk.

"I don't lay claim," he continued, "to be a man of very grand ideas—I am humble in my notions. I don't know what pride means; I can understand where the greatest happiness of my life is to be found—and where it will assuredly be lost."

"You're a little romantic, Grey—that's all."

"I was never romantic," he replied; "I have always been cool, and easy, and matter-of-fact. I haven't dashed at this idea; it is not the child of a hundred or two trashy novels; it's a sober conviction that Mercy Ricksworth's a good girl, and would make me a good wife."

"But——"

"Wait a moment; I shall have finished soon," said he; "you'll spare me your 'buts' till the play's over, and we have rung down the green curtain."

"That's only fair, Grey."

"I don't want a stuck-up, fine lady for a farmer's wife, to begin with—I shall be content with a virtuous, pretty, light-hearted companion, to brighten my home, and lighten a heart which is not very difficult to gladden at any time. I don't want a woman with money; for the money is thrown in your teeth once in twenty-four hours; never a blessing—generally a taunt. Mercy Ricksworth is a girl I can love—she is not illiterate—she has a claim to be a little of a heroine."

"Indeed!"

"She struggles hard for her father; hopes against hope to see him less of a scamp and a black sheep; tries to counteract her mother's *rasping* way of making a convert of old Ricksworth; fights up-

wards amidst the shadowy life in which her lot is cast, and from which, please God, I will stretch a hand to save her."

"Or share the shadows with her."

"Better with her than in the sunshine without her," said Grey, sturdily; "although I look forward to a life of sunshine, if ever I am lucky enough to induce her to say 'Yes.' Her father will be no clog to me—his own wild love for his child will keep him away."

"Doubtful."

"It keeps him away from the Hall: a word of Mercy's has more influence over him than you can possibly imagine. There is no rock ahead, take my word for it, Neider."

"And your own family?"

"I'm a sample," he said, laughing; "we're all the same pattern. Easy-going, unambitious folk, who will take my view of the case when the first astonishment is recovered from—and wish me joy, and shake

me heartily by the hands, and be only curious to know what the future bride is like."

"A family of which you should feel proud to be a member."

"Well," he said reflectively, "I am."

"I am flattered by your confidence, Grey," I said; "what I, the stern world, think of the case is another matter. Looking at it soberly, I can see it is an unwise step; speaking as a friend, I would warn you not to make it."

"What, after all my explanations!" he said, a little reproachfully.

"I think you might do better."

"And don't you think me also a fool for taking you into my confidence?" he cried.

"No, I think you a friend—one whose frank nature I haven't half appreciated."

"Thank you—thank you."

"But," I added, "I am sorry to hear the story. You should have been the hero of a fairer one."

“But if I am content?”

“With the present—what of the future, Grey?”

“I don’t fear it. I can meet it,” he said, boldly.

“And the girl, Mercy Ricksworth—is she aware of the state of your affections?”

“I hope so; I think she must be,” he said very quickly; “she’s not a dull girl, and I haven’t used any great effort to disguise my feelings. She’s a girl who can make any man happy; on her virtue, courage, faith, I stake my honour.”

“There is no doubt of her accepting you, I think.”

“Ah! but there is,” said he; “she’s plaguy firm at times, and only to-day she has told me that I must not come any more—that people will talk—that Sir Richard has already objected to the frequent occurrence of my name in the visitors’ book. She thought you and Sir Richard were arguing the point, and she’s very

tenacious concerning her name. But I have hope."

"Well, I wish you luck, Grey. Accept my best wishes—if they're worth anything—for a happy issue to your love-venture. May your life be as fair as it deserves to be."

"You're a friend."

"I hope so."

"A friend for life, I mean," said Grey; "I have said once before I never change."

And he never did. In sickness and in health, in the midst of his own troubles and of mine, he was ever the true friend. He shakes me by the hand still—his honest English face is looking into mine!

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CHAPTER III.

I DELIVER SIR RICHARD'S MESSAGE.

I SAW Thirsk late on the evening of that day. We had played whist after supper, in the farm parlour; Mr. Genny and Grey against Nicholas Thirsk and me. A shrewd, careful old whist-player was farmer Genny—a Deschapelles, born to blush unseen in the desert air of Welsdon in the Woods. He knew every card in one's hand before the careless owner was aware of it himself, and as a matter of course, turned many honest sixpences into the depths of his capacious pockets.

Genny was always good-tempered over his whist—people who win at cards are gene-

rally in most excellent spirits—and we all went to our respective rooms on amicable terms with ourselves and general society. Thirsk had been in his best vein, and his humorous sallies had elicited from us many a hearty English laugh, that made the place ring again. Harriet Genny, watching us from a distance over a pile of her uncle's ungainly socks, broke into little laughs over her work, despite her effort to preserve an equable demeanour. For Nicholas Thirsk, gentleman or farm-pupil, had been never a favourite of hers.

At the doors of our rooms, I said—

“Can I have a word or two with you to-night, Thirsk?”

“Eh?—what's in the wind, Neider?”

“I have only to relate a little incident which occurred to me this morning.”

“Where?”

“In the ruins of Welsdon Castle.”

“Come in!—what is it?”

He almost dragged me into his room, and

somewhat uncourteously shut William Grey out on the landing. He looked excited, too, and certainly prepared for worse news than that which I had to communicate.

"Now, then — pile up the agony, Neider!"

"There's not a great deal of agony to pile."

"Go on!" he said, with feverish impatience.

"The fact is, I met Sir Richard Freemantle in the ruins."

"What did *you* want at the ruins?"

"To see if the right of inspection was as open to me as to you."

"Well?"

"And Sir Richard Freemantle was there."

"He's always there, pottering over his bits of brick and ugly relics of a past in which all his interest and affection lie buried—the mole!"

"And he accosted me. He remembered

my face on that Sunday when you made your first and last appearance at Welsdon church."

"The devil doubt his memory!"

"And he spoke of you."

"And told you I was all that was bad," he added, quickly.

"No."

"Odd that—do explain, Neider, and not jerk out every word as if it were a pain to you. Now, then!"

"Sir Richard merely sought to defend his own character, which he thought you might have possibly exhibited to me, perhaps to others, in a sinister light. He added, by way of conclusion, that you had misjudged him all your life; and that if any motive foreign to that which is ostensibly apparent to the world, has led you to this neighbourhood, it must inevitably fail."

"Don't the Scriptures tell us to beware of false prophets?" cried Thirsk, mockingly.

"Is there any occasion to bring the Scriptures in question?"

"Oh! you're a bit of a saint—I forgot. You read your bible of an evening, after honest folk are in their beds."

"I wish you did!"

"It might have turned me out a saint, too. *N'importe*, the world is big enough for saints and sinners; and Fortune is an impartial goddess, who showers her prizes in the midst of us indiscriminately. In your hands there will fall nothing but blanks."

"Quite sure?"

"Quite."

"May I ask what you mean?"

"Only what I say—remember it in the day when you throw for the prize on which your heart is built."

"And in your case, Thirsk?"

"Oh! a rich prize, that will set me up in the world, and bring all the old friends back—remember that, too."

"I will do my best to remember your prophecies."

"As for Sir Richard Freemantle—that for his baronetship!" and he snapped his fingers in the air.

"Good night, Thirsk."

"Wait a moment. It is not often I get a chance of a palaver with you—my only friend for the nonce, and not a bad sort, as I hope, as I believe. What do you think of Sir Richard?"

"I have not thought a great deal about him."

"Isn't he a proud, stiff-backed fool, with his heart in his ruins, like a fossil in the rock?"

"I should say there are some good points about him—but I do not profess to be a judge of character."

"Lucky for you. And so good night to you, Neider, and peace to your manes."

He extended his hand to me, and when mine was within it, he shook it warmly,

and muttered something that I did not catch. I was on the landing, when he called "Neider!"

Entering his room again, he met me with a face strangely excited, and dark.

"No matter—good night to you again. That's all."

"You are sure it is all?"

"I thought for a moment that the time had come to tell you my story; but the waters bear me away again, and the evil of to-day is sufficient to dwell on. I thought I might have ventured to ask your advice—I who never took to advice in my life, and who turn from it now, proud of my own strength and stubbornness! Don't you hear me say good night?" he cried, with an impetuous stamp of his foot.

"Good night, Thirsk," and I left him a second time, and repaired to my room, leaving the door ajar, lest his fitful nature should prompt him to make a third recall.

I had a dreamy idea that my advice might

be of service ; that his mind was disturbing and deluding him, and that with plain common sense to view the question before him, many doubts might be resolved, and much sober prudence inculcated. I was an ego-tist then, and vain of my phlegmatic nature—that German stolidity which my father had bequeathed me with his farm.

That German stolidity !

CHAPTER IV.

MY OWN STORY.

I APPROACH matters personal. I have dallied with them until now, but the current is too strong for me, and must bear me for awhile to the surface of this tale. Was it here in which my story began, or at some little distance, when I passed it by, and strove to be an idler on the banks? Surely not here, even not there—mayhap on the night I burned my day-dreams in Farmer Genny's kitchen. It is difficult, it is even impossible to fix the date—it has none. Looking back, and writing soberly here at my desk, I cannot say when that story took its rise—the mists are over its beginning.

That there was a story, new and strange to me, in which I had to play my part, and see others take their stand therein, I knew too well.

When Nicholas Thirsk paused in the promptings of an impulsive nature, and drew the cloak of his selfism tighter round him, I did not doubt it. I might have guessed it, known it before, albeit I kept my secret to myself, and strove to think of other things.

It was in that striving that I fairly awakened to all which was before me.

The nights were drawing in, the lights were on the table, and I had just completed a second letter to my mother, when Harriet Genny entered the farm parlour.

"Where is my uncle—and the others?" she asked.

"They are together in the village, I believe. Mr. Genny is giving them a practical lesson in horse-buying."

"Ah! I had forgotten. And why are

you not receiving your share of the lesson?"

"I am somewhat tired," I replied, shrinking a little from the searching look in her hazel eyes.

"Are you writing to your mother?"

"Yes, Miss Genny."

"A true mother's son," she remarked; "it is pleasant to see absent friends not entirely forgotten."

"They never are by those who are worthy of a thought."

"Which you are."

"Oh! of course," I responded, with a laugh.

"How I do detest those short, unmeaning laughs of yours," she said, with her customary abruptness; "they're not natural, and they deceive nobody."

"I was not attempting deceit."

"You would think it a rude question, Mr. Neider, if I were to ask you the tenor of that letter to your mother?"

"I would think it a curious question from anyone, save Miss Genny."

"Thank you for the compliment; and why not curious from Miss Genny?"

She had taken her seat near the fire-side—the first fire of the season—and was busy at those eternal socks, from which her uncle stumped so many heels away.

"From anyone else I should think the question arose from mere curiosity—I am very certain that you are above that."

"Don't be quite certain," she said, saucily.

She was in good spirits that evening, and less abrupt in her manner than usual. Here and there a flash of that brusqueness which might be natural to her, brought up amidst brusque people; but still more gentle and womanly that night, and looking, with that smile upon her face, so young and bright, and fit for better things!

"I was always an inquisitive girl—and womanhood has not outgrown curiosity."

"Then I will satisfy your curiosity, if you will allow me."

I arose and offered her the four closely written sheets of minor news, which I had concocted for my mother's amusement in the lonely farm in Cumberland.

She reddened as I advanced, and thrust the letter smartly aside.

"No; not so curious as that, sir," she said, indignantly; "I asked for the tenor of it, not the letter itself."

"News of no very great importance, then, Miss Genny," I explained; "the old story of my farming life—how rapidly I improve under Mr. Genny's tuition, and how farming agrees with me, and leaves me nothing to wish for."

"Say that again."

I said it with a heightened colour—she kept her thoughtful eyes fixed so steadily upon me.

"And it is all untrue, Mr. Neider," she said, after my second assertion; "white lies,

to deceive a faithful mother, who could bear the truth just as well. Why do you men ever treat us women as children, with whom it is not judicious to place implicit confidence?"

"How do you know all this is untrue, Miss Genny?" I asked; "what possible motive could I have in conveying a false impression of my state of mind?"

"Love for your mother—a worthy passion, that might have shown itself in a different manner, and no harm done."

"Is there harm done now?"

"There will come a bitter disappointment to that mother some day."

"Pray explain."

"Farming does not agree with you; you do *not* rapidly improve; there is at the bottom of your heart more to wish for now than ever there was in your life."

I did not answer—I felt it was all true, though I had hoped to deceive myself into a new belief. This young woman,

only two years my senior, read me like a book.

“Do you deny it, Mr. Neider?”

“I neither own it nor deny it, Miss Genny,” I replied; “you startle me from my own convictions by your earnestness—by the belief in your assertions.”

There was a pause; then I said,

“Will you tell me on what foundation you base your convictions of my duplicity?”

“Duplicity is a hard word.”

“Let it remain,” I replied.

“Then go back to your desk. You fidget me dreadfully, standing there so black and angry.”

“Upon my word, Miss Genny, I’m not angry.”

“Looks go for nothing, as well as words, I see.”

I flung myself back in my chair, and waited for this shrewd woman’s reasons. I had worn my disguise well, and yet she

had seen deeper into my heart than I had dared to fathom for myself; into the dark recesses of that mystery I had not cared to pierce. I was deceiving myself, until her words aroused me.

"I see you thoughtful—even absent. To much of my uncle's teaching I am convinced you have turned a deaf ear; you do not look forward to your Cumberland farm with much pleasurable anticipation."

"There may be other reasons for that," I said.

There were, and she might never know them. Looking at her then, an earnest woman who loved truth, I could believe it.

"Light ones—let them pass."

"Light or heavy, let them pass now, Miss Genny."

"I should have lived twenty-two years in vain, if I were not able to read a little of my fellow-creatures' motives. I do not set myself up for a woman more clear-sighted than the rest of my sex—anyone in my place, in-

terested in you, must have seen the same."

"Will you let me thank you for that interest?" I said, suddenly. "It is kind, it is——"

"Spare me your thanks. I am interested in everything living and breathing the same atmosphere with me—even in the canary swinging aloft there in his cage by the window."

This allusion to a feathered favourite of hers in the same breath with myself nettled me. It was odd that we were never long together without a little skirmish of words.

"I wonder whether *he* is tired of farming life, and disguising his thoughts, and deceiving his mother, and inclined to be absent in mind."

"You can't discourse any great while without a sneer, Mr. Neider," said she, rising; "I have told you before that you resemble Mr. Thirsk."

"I have done sneering, as you term it, Miss Genny. Don't go."

"I have nothing more to say—at least, not a great deal."

"Pray, be seated."

"No," she added, shortly.

I folded my letter, and placed it in the envelope; she stood by the mantelpiece, watching the operation.

"You intend to send that false letter, then?"

"I have never acknowledged its falsity."

"If I would not own that my present life was distasteful, and my companions unsuitable, I would, at least, suppress a glowing account that must deceive a gentle mother."

I turned the envelope over and over in my hands.

"Your mother must see the truth one day—the folly of that stupid promise made in a thoughtless moment. Mr. Neider, I would tell her my purposed life was a mistake."

"I am not so sure of it."

"You are not happy."

"The life before me in the Vale of St. John does not fill me with very great dismay—did it convulse me with horror, I have promised."

"For your mother's sake—and your mother may not wish it."

"Leave it to time."

"You will never make a farmer; you will never earn a penny by your calling."

"Haven't I sufficient brains?"

"No."

"Ah! that shows how mistaken even clever women can be!"

I was sorry for the taunt an instant afterwards—she changed so suddenly.

"I shall never talk of your future again."

"Don't say that!"

"I shall leave you to——"

"Don't say that!" I shouted, with a vehemence that made her jump again, and frightened the canary off his perch; "I'm only

unsettled and hasty, and foolish words *will* escape me. You must speak of my future—I am an egotist, and love to talk of myself. See here.”

I rose, went to the fire, and dropped the letter into the flames.

“It was a false missive—I own it.”

“I knew it!”

“I will write plainly and simply the history of my progress,” I said; “‘nothing extenuate, or set down aught in malice.’ Are we friends?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, shake hands upon it, Miss Genny.”

“There’s no occasion.”

“I shan’t believe I am forgiven for all my harsh words, if you don’t shake hands,” said I; “why, your forehead is furrowed now.”

“I’m not thinking of *you*,” she answered with a trifle more abruptness than usual.

“Will you shake hands?”

“If it be any satisfaction to you—there!”

She placed her hand in mine for an in-

stant; for an instant her thoughtful eyes were looking into mine, and my heart gave three or four sudden thumps that were unaccountable. I could have held her hand in mine an hour, and it was only its hasty withdrawal that brought me to myself.

“Are you going now?”

“Yes, haven’t I been here long enough?”

She went straight from the room, and left me staring into the fire, and thinking of—oh! so many things! Of that which was; of that which might be in the bright time that dazed me then to dwell on. I knew then, or rather confessed then, for the first time, that I was thinking too much of Harriet Genny.

She had been in the midst of many thoughts which I have penned down in former chapters of this history—she had been there *despite my will*. I had seen her every day for many weeks; my position in the farmhouse brought me every day in contact with her; I had seen her, conversed

with her, and yet shut my eyes to that which might have been expected.

For she was a woman in whom one must perforce take interest; earnest and straightforward—a woman who had seen some sorrow in her early life, or met with some trial, disappointment, that had shadowed it before its time. A young woman as out of place in her present position as I might be in that future farm buried amidst the still life of the Cumberland fells. One born for better things, well-educated, clever, and clear-sighted, whose natural amiability had been spoilt by much constraint, and an utter lack of sympathy with her and her ideas.

In her fits of petulance, her hasty exclamations against all which was narrow-minded or false, there were the attributes of a nature that despised deceit, and was quick to express a disapprobation of it. Casual observers would have set her down for an ill-tempered girl; those who had

time to study her could not long be ignorant of the sterling metal lying beneath the surface.

Harriet Genny, if possible, was a trifle more terse and monosyllabic after that last conference than heretofore; even evaded me, as though a spark from the fire that had begun in my heart had flickered forth during that interview and betrayed me. It was a strange reserve which troubled me; I felt that if she were aware of my growing feelings towards her, and desired to check them, she was adopting the right course; and such an adoption pained and worried me.

From the distance that suddenly sprung up between us, one might have imagined a serious quarrel had occurred, and I used my best endeavours to bridge over the gulf that seemed widening between us every day.

It was a week before the opportunity presented itself to speak again. On a Sunday afternoon, when Uncle Genny,

tired out by the second long sermon to which he had been an auditor that day, sat and slept in his arm-chair by the fire, with a pocket-handkerchief as big as a tray-cloth spread over his head and shoulders, *à la Blondin* in the sack movement.

Mr. Grey had gone for a stroll, Mr. Thirsk was in his own room, and Harriet Genny had set aside a religious work she had been endeavouring to read by the firelight.

"Miss Genny, I wish to ask you a question," I said, in a low voice.

"What is it?"

She spoke in a louder tone than was necessary, as if to protest against any idea of a secret conference. I glanced nervously at her uncle, whose disjointed snore was sweet melody in my ears just then.

"Have I offended you in any way?"

"What made you think that?" was her counter-query.

"You are different in your manner towards me—you have lost all interest in that

future of mine which I flattered myself once concerned you a little."

"Oh! no."

"Still, you are offended."

Unconsciously she lowered her voice a little.

"If I were offended, Mr. Neider, I should show it in a different manner," she said; "but I have had no cause to take offence."

"You are different—you will pardon me, but there is a something new and strange in your manner, which perplexes me."

"You are always full of fancies."

"Do you deny a change, then?"

"I may be a trifle more thoughtful—I have a reason to be always dull at this time of the year. If I am changed, don't think for an instant that it is any word or act of yours that has originated my new mood."

"I will be glad to think otherwise."

"You must consider yourself a very important personage," she said, pursing

her red lips, as though striving to keep down a smile that wished to force its way there.

“On the contrary, a very insignificant atom to float hither and thither for a few months, and then be puffed to another sphere, with no one to miss or regret its departure.”

“An acrid comment, that is possibly thrown out as a bait for a compliment, Mr. Neider.”

“I detest compliments !”

“Sensible man !”

“Miss Genny, do you believe for an instant that there will be a soul in this great farm—even Nero—who will not be as happy after my departure as before my existence was dreamt of?”

“Ipps may feel it a little, if you fee him well.”

“Miss Genny, you——”

“Uncle, is it not time for tea, do you think?” she interrupted ; and the appeal, in

a clear ringing voice, gave her uncle a start, and brought down the voluminous handkerchief into his lap.

“Ay! lass—I doan’t mind if I do, now.”

“It is getting late.”

“And there’s another bout at church, to knock through, before there be a chance of Monday morning. Haugh!” and Mr. Genny yawned, and stretched out his arms and legs, and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, like a great school-boy.

“You are always thinking of Monday morning, uncle, on a Sabbath day,” said Harriet, half reproachfully.

“Ay!—not that Sunday be a bad day in its way, Harriet, my dear,” said he, “for it gives a man a moighty long toime to think what is good for him. But the crops will run in my head somehow, though I go to church three toimes on a Sunday, as befits a man loike myself, who be so well known in the parish. Let’s have tea, lass.”

Harriet turned away to give her orders to

the farm servants, and her uncle watched her departure from the room.

"I can't make that girl out lately," he said, half aloud; "she ain't happy."

"Not 'happy, Mr. Genny?" I said, quickly.

"Ay!—are ye there, Mr. Neider? I didn't see ye, now the fire's bur'nt red loike, or I moight have kept my tongue to myself—which is the proper way to get on in the world, if ye have your eyes open at the same time, moind ye. Noa—I doan't believe she's happy."

"I don't detect much difference in her."

"Ye do a little, then?"

"I have had my fancies—nothing more than fancies."

"Rum things for a farmer to have in stock," said he; then he added, drily, "moine ain't fancies."

"Oh!"

"Foive years ago she was a different girl—more loike her cousin Mercy, only not

inclined to giggle and cry so much in a breath—sharp as a needle, and as quick with an answer—ah! as I am,” he concluded, egotistically.

“She is as quick as ever then?”

“Ay;” and then, after looking at me under his hand, which he placed pent-house fashion over his eyes; “and has she been giving ye a word of a sort, my lad?”

“Oh, no!”

“She be astonishingly quick with an answer: it roons in the Genny family,” chuckled the farmer; “but darm it, she’s not what she used to be.”

“It’s rather dull for her here.”

“She’ll be married some day.”

“Eh?”

“She’ll be married some day, I take it. What’s to becom of Follingay Farm then, unless I marry some one myself, I doan’t see very clearly.”

“Is there any——”

But Harriet Genny’s re-appearance cut

short my important question; and Mr. Genny, to conceal his embarrassment at having been caught, stirred the fire and said, "Ay," for no just cause or reason that could possibly be detected.

Returning from church that evening,—Harriet Genny by my side, to my own small astonishment, and Mr. Grey and the farmer a little way in advance—the farmer's niece said suddenly—

"You and my uncle were speaking of me this afternoon: what had I said or done?"

"Do you wish me to betray confidence?"

"It was not confidence."

"Well, it was a curious topic, concerning your future marriage."

"He—he alluded to that!" she cried.

"Yes. You are trembling, Miss Genny—what's the matter?"

"Go on—what more did he say? I have a right to know this, Mr. Neider; I must and will know it! What more did he say to you about *this*?"

"Nothing."

"You are prevaricating."

"Indeed, I am not."

"You were asking a question of my uncle when I came in—what was it?"

"Upon my word, Miss Genny, I——"

She made two hasty steps away from me, whether to seize her uncle by the collar or not, and demand an answer from him on the spot, it is difficult to determine. I was at her side to explain.

"I—I was about to ask if there were any one existent in the world to make his assertion anything more than supposition."

"Is it any business of yours?"

"No, Miss Genny—no business of mine!"

"Then——"

She paused, hesitated, never completed her sentence. After a moment she spoke again, in a tone strangely altered, with a voice that I thought faltered a little.

"I have an objection to be talked too much about, Mr. Neider," she said; "and

the subject was one concerning which neither of you had a right to speak. He is a good uncle, to whom I owe much, but not always too considerate. You are the friend of a day, and too—inquisitive. Let it content you to know that—in all probability, I shall never marry.”

“A rash assertion,” I said, in a hoarse voice.

“Why don’t you add the satirist’s remark, that all women say the same thing?”

“I am not in a satirist’s mood.”

“You are very taciturn this evening.”

“I am the friend of a day, without a right to express an opinion.”

“Ah! you treasure my words!”

“Cruel and kind ones—both.”

“Sir!”

“Pardon me, I am a dreamer—I am walking in my sleep to-night.”

“Mind the stile here, then, or you’ll wake to bruises and destruction.”

She said it lightly, but how my heart leaped ! It was as if from the tones of my voice she knew she had pained me, and knew—yes, knew !—that a few words spoken in a different manner would be sufficient atonement for her harshness.

I crossed the stile, and held out my hand to assist her. When she was by my side, I drew her gloved hand on my arm.

“It is dark across the fields to-night—do you mind very much my escort, Miss Harriet ? ”

She did not answer the question, but she let her hand rest upon my arm across the fields towards her uncle's farm. And it was bright as noonday, with the full moon shining down on us, and Grey and Genny some twenty yards in advance.

An indifferent conversation enough between us, concerning the sermon of the evening, the paucity of the congregation, the mistake the organist made in the second hymn, and how it threw the Sunday-

school out, the fine weather that lingered with us still and kept the leaves from falling. But it was a happy time, and her voice was low and musical, and thrilled me ! Was it dreamland still in which I walked, and she an angel born of it?—I could have walked on all my life, and never cared to wake !

CHAPTER V.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

"THIS be a bit of a game that I can't exactly make oot," said Mr. Genny, the next morning; "Mr. Neider—Ipps, look here!"

I had been lingering at the porch in the hope of seeing Harriet Genny before I left the farm-house—Ipps was trotting to and fro, from the dairy to the farm-yard, with the agility of a youth of twenty.

We both approached Mr. Genny, who was standing on the patch of gravel between the farm-house and the white palings skirting the road, deeply interested in certain signs at his feet.

"What do you make of them?"

"They look like footprints surely," said Ipps.

"Darm it!—they are foot-prints, aren't they?"

"Wull—I should say so."

"And what do ye say, Mr. Neider?"

"I agree with you, sir."

"It rained in the noight, and the gravel was soft, and whoever took the trouble to walk up and down here sank in a troifle," said Genny, nibbling the horn handle of his whip; "there be thieves about, I reckon."

"Aren't heard of any," said Ipps.

"Ye're getting old and daft, my man," said Genny, contemptuously, "or ye who are first up to see after the horses moight have found something else about. And that Nero is old and daft too, I reckon—unless—unless—*ay!*"

And a bright thought having occurred to Mr. Genny, he relapsed into silence.

"I can't make it oot," he said, after a few

moments' intent reverie; "it's a botheration, which'll coom right if I leave it alone, mayhap. I think we'll thrash this morning, Mr. Neider. Wheat's rising moighty fast in London."

Mr. Genny alluded no more to his perplexities; in fact, his sudden change to matters foreign to that subject, for which he had summoned me and Ipps to his side, was somewhat remarkable.

When his back was turned, I examined the footprints myself, and was not a little surprised to see no traces under the parlour window above, which was the sleeping chamber of Mr. Thirsk.

"What may be your 'pinion now, Measter Neider?" suggested Ipps.

"I reserve my opinion, Ipps."

"Wull, then, I'll reserve moine," he said, with a laugh—"although I have my own idea."

"Oh! have you?"

"That it's beggars or gipsies," he said, for-

getting his reservation—"there's a plaguy soight of 'em aboot just now,—and they have been looking here for a stray goose or so. Now, I think on it, the dog did bark about three."

"I didn't hear him."

"He was cutting roond the front of the house, then. I hope he bit a piece out of their legs—the warmints!"

And Ipps went grumbling away to fetch the garden roller, which his master had ordered for his disordered fore-court. I followed Mr. Genny, who had altered his mind about the thrashing since our interview of a few minutes since.

"I'm thinking we'll have sowing in that nine-acred field by the plantation," said Genny; "if ye'll see to it, and get the men together. The drill-plough will soon roon over that moite of ground. Where's Mr. Thirsk this morning?"

"He is getting up, I believe."

"Ay—is he?"

He inquired concerning Mr. Grey next, but did not appear to attend to my response ; and a few minutes afterwards, he was on his way to the village, on an errand concerning which he did not take the trouble to inform me.

At a later hour Thirsk came sauntering towards the field wherein I was superintending operations.

"My industrious young man, if you had been only paid piece-work for your services, what a rich man you would have become by this time!"

"Virtue is its own reward."

"I don't even believe that," said Thirsk.

"You don't believe anything."

"I believe that Mr. Genny is becoming suspicious of a certain friend of ours. What nonsense was that about footprints, this morning?"

"A suspicion that there had been people late in the night near the Farm."

"A curious man that Mr. Genny."

"And if people take not warning from the shadows before, the coming events may embarrass their plans."

"Very possibly."

"What are you going to do to-day?"

"Oh! I'm in excellent spirits—I don't care."

"Will you relieve guard?"

Thirsk shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't mind," said he, less warmly;
"there's very little more of this fun for me, Neider—I have been sitting on a rock, awaiting the sunrise."

"Well, has it come?"

"The clouds are crimson, with fair augury of its advent. Wish me joy."

"I wish you joy in everything that will promote your happiness and peace of mind, Thirsk."

"Spoken with a reserve. Will you believe I am stepping fast towards the 'Bowers of Bliss,' as the pantomimes have it?"

"I'll hope so, for your sake."

“ ‘Change into brilliant harlequin,’ says the fairy queen, and lo, the transformation is effected, and the ugly garments, and the great paste-board mask fly off to the side-wings, and leave the glittering fact in the flesh before us. Neider, you will not know me. To-day a man in the dark ; to-morrow a star of the first magnitude !”

“Have you heard from your father?”

“I wouldn’t answer the sceptic if I had. No, my own fair exertions lead to my fair future. They will sweeten life when I bask in the sunshine like a lizard. Now, leave me to a sense of coming enjoyments !”

“Certainly.”

“And come to my room at nine o’ the clock, to receive five pounds I owe you.”

“Very well.”

“And to receive the thanks of a wild man of the woods, about to enter sober society, and take his right place therein. To-day a farm-labourer—to morrow a

gentleman. I shall enjoy the contrast, Neider, exceedingly."

He shook me by both hands—he laughed almost unmeaningly in his excitement. More than once the doubt if he had not been drinking suggested itself to me, he was so strange and restless. I left him to his wanderings in the field, and to his singing wild snatches of song in English and French, and turned my attention to matters connected with my business—some work that necessitated my standing at the door of a barn which commanded a view of the farm-house porch and the great dairy, where the graceful figure of Harriet Genny might cross my range of vision, now and then.

But Harriet Genny was busy within, and I was only rewarded for my pains by a sight of Mr. Genny making his appearance about twelve, in company with a white and tan dog of colossal proportions, and a most forbidding expression of countenance.

I crossed the yard and met Mr. Genny at the gate.

"Take care, Mr. Neider, he's tied by a long chain, and is uncommonly loikely to bite."

"A new dog?" I inquired.

"Ay—and a nipper!"

He proceeded to fasten the dog to a ring in the wall under the parlour window, consequently immediately under the window of Nicholas Thirsk, Esq.

"I shall tie him up short in the day, and give him the run of an uncoommon long chain in the night—I'll have no tramps in my neighbourhood."

"And Nero?"

"Will keep to his own quarters for a day or two, lad. There now," backing from the ring to which he had fastened the dog to the extremity of the palings, "that's what I call a foine beast, and a credit to any farm. He cost me a couple of guineas, the beggar," added Genny,

shaking his fist at him, and eliciting sundry fierce barks and jumps from the dog by way of response.

At the dinner-hour Mr. Thirsk entered the farm-yard, and again the deep voice of the hound aroused the echoes.

"That's a fine addition to your canine stock, farmer," he said, on entering.

"Ay."

"If there's one thing I like more than another, it's a good dog."

"And this will be a credit to us," added Genny; "and I'll warrant ye doan't tame him in a hurry, Mr. Thirsk."

"Do you think I am a Van Amburgh?"

"Humbug or not, he's too much for ye."

"Too much trouble, for I'm pressed for time."

"Ay?" said Genny, interrogatively.

"I think there's a parcel waiting for me at the railway station."

"Shall I send Ipps?"

“No, thank you—it’s a parcel of confectionery, and he might eat the contents.”

“Ay,” said Genny again, and his bushy grey eyebrows bent a little over the keen eyes beneath them.

Thirsk departed early in the afternoon, and entered no further appearance till eight in the evening, before which time I had met with an adventure.

It was a habit of mine to smoke once a-day a favourite German pipe—generally after tea, when the day’s business was at an end, and I could ruminate upon the part I had played therein. That particular evening I had put on my hat and strolled out of the farmhouse into the green lane running between the farm-land of Mr. Genny, and the dusky plantation of Sir Richard Freemantle, baronet; there I had commenced a promenade of some two or three hundred feet, turning where the road took higher ground, and so back in the direction of the village, passing each time the house wherein

I had been some three or four months a sojourner.

It was close on seven in the evening; the moon had not risen yet, and the road lay deep in the shadow. I was very speedily in a fair train of thought, after I had commenced my perambulations. Yesterday had been a happy day, and it had ended happily; to-day Harriet Genny had been gentle, even shy—there was much to think of and make my heart light.

Suddenly there was a little incident to make my heart leap—the click of a latch in the oak palings fencing in the plantation on the opposite side. I stopped in the shadow of some trees facing it, and extinguished my pipe; there was something wrong, or something that loved the night, a short distance there across the road. The gate opened, and a female figure came hurrying across towards me, as though she had expected me in that place from the first.

“I thought you might be here,

Nicholas—and, oh ! I have been so anxious to——”

She stopped and looked earnestly at me.

“ Who are you ?—who are you, in heaven’s name ?—not *Richard* ! ” she added, with a strange gasp.

“ Neither Richard nor Nicholas—simply a Mr. Neider, a farm-pupil.”

“ You are Nicho—you are a friend of Mr. Thirsk’s ? ” she said, with an air of great relief.

“ I have that honour.”

“ He tells me you are his valued friend—he speaks very highly of you.”

“ He is very kind.”

“ May I ask—may I ask,” she added, after a struggle with her breath, “ if Mr. Thirsk be at the farm, sir ? I am most anxious to see him for a moment. It is on business of great importance.”

“ He has been absent from the farm some hours.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

“He mentioned the railway station.”

She moaned, and wrung her hands, and looked at me with eyes that flashed beneath her veil.

“What is to become of him?” she cried involuntarily; “how will it end? Good heavens!—how will it end now?”

“If I can be the bearer of any message to him on his return, Miss Freemantle may command me.”

“Ah!—you know me?”

“I have had the pleasure of seeing Miss Freemantle and her brother at Welsdon church twice every Sunday for some months.”

“I hope I *can* trust you, sir,” she said almost beseechingly.

“You may trust me,” was my rejoinder.

Had I expressed any vehement language at this juncture, I believe she would have fled back to the private wicket in the fence—my

simple statement seemed to afford her courage.

"Will you kindly be the bearer of this note from—from a friend of mine to Mr. Thirsk," she said, placing a sealed letter in my hand—"will you assure him that that friend fears still, and has altered her intention—must, by the force of circumstance, alter it to-night. Tell him that Mercy Ricksworth is discharged too, and——"

"Mercy Ricksworth!"

"Do you know her, sir?"

"Only as a niece of Mr. Genny's, who visits the Farm sometimes. I am sorry to hear that she has left Sir Richard's service."

"No matter—no matter," said she, hurriedly; "will you convey my message to Mr. Thirsk—it may be partly in the letter, it may not. I am—my poor friend," she corrected, "is too distracted, God help her, to remember the few hasty sentences which she has penned, in the fear that she might not meet him here to tell him all. I hope you understand me, Mr. Neider?"

"Perfectly."

"Will you repeat my message to me?"

I did so.

"You will be a true friend to him, if you do not deceive me. And I, sir—for my friend—shall ever be eternally indebted."

She was across the road, and through the park-fence, before I could reply. I could hear the rustle of her dress amongst the trees, and the hasty patter of her light glancing feet rapidly receding. I listened for the last faint footfall, and then returned bewildered to the Farm, where the methodical life in the farm parlour contrasted so strangely with the adventure I had met.

I felt almost like a culprit in their midst—a fellow-conspirator with Nicholas Thirsk against the peace and happiness of something or some one. However, I had promised, and I had no right to let my embarrassment betray me. I played whist with Genny, his niece, and Grey, and lost every trick, and trumped Grey my partner's

highest cards, and made wild snatches at Mr. Genny's, and was shouted at for my pains.

"Are your brains wool-gathering, lad?" said Genny, when he had lost patience at my many blunders; "or are ye after some girl down in Welsdon, or some girl after ye, now? Ay!"

Thirsk's entrance relieved me from the difficulty of responding to this question; he came in with a light ringing tread, and carried his head so high that he looked some inches taller.

"Whist again!" he cried; "upon my word, this almost comes within the act against gambling, Mr. Genny."

"Ay!"

"You look very comfortable, you four, this September night," he continued; "shall we make it loo, for sociability's sake?"

"I doan't intend to play any more to-night," was Genny's sullen answer.

"I want to see you all smiling to-night—

the best of good company—and to be the best of good company myself. Come now !”

And having put his hat on a side table, he sat down by Grey’s side.

But Mr. Genny was not inclined to reciprocate the advances of Mr. Thirsk—on the contrary, turned a very icy front to the genial mood of his versatile pupil. Nothing that Thirsk could say or do had any effect on him, and a few minutes afterwards he was asking for his chamber candlestick.

“ You haven’t supped, uncle.”

“ Ay ! and I doan’t mean.”

“ And with this parting growl, Mr. Genny took himself to bed.

“ Fall in the price of wheat, and threatened increase of a sixpence per acre on land,” muttered Thirsk.

“ Neither, sir !” responded Miss Genny.

“ Something must have happened to upset our worthy host, I fear, Miss Genny,” said Thirsk ; “ I cannot remember ever being a witness to so much discourtesy.”

"My uncle has his reasons, sir."

"I hope you do not think I am severe upon your uncle, Miss Genny," said Thirsk ; "I am only hurt at his hard manner towards me. Shall we continue the game?"

"It is late," said Harriet.

"All against me!" cried Thirsk, "the short answer and the cold glance to all my attempts at good-will. I will imitate Mr. Genny's wise example."

He went out of the room, and came in a moment afterwards with a chamber candlestick. He walked straight towards Miss Genny, and extended his hand.

"Good night, Miss Genny."

She did not appear to notice the movement, but returned his good night.

"Do you bear any malice against me?"

"I, sir?" and Harriet looked up in some surprise.

"For all my past demeanours, wild, restless, excitable, uncharitable, do you bear me ill-will? Honestly now, Miss Genny."

“No, sir.”

“Then shake hands with me, and say good night. It’s an odd humour of mine, but it’s a good one, and leads me to ask pardon for all past offences. Good night, Miss Genny.”

And he would not withdraw his hand, which Harriet, to end his persistence, lightly touched. The scene reminded me of Sunday afternoon’s, when I was equally as persevering—but the contrast in her manner was very flattering to me, and gave me quite a flutter of delight.

Mr. Grey and I, both thinking we could dispense with supper that night, accompanied Nicholas Thirsk upstairs. On the landing he went through the same ceremony with Grey as he had with Miss Genny.

“Good night, Grey,” he said, “you will excuse this frivolity of mine?”

“Certainly”

They shook hands, and Grey went into his room. Thirsk beckoned me into his own.

"Just a few moments, Neider, before I bid you good night, and pay you five pounds that I owe you."

"Just a few moments also, Thirsk," I said. "Before you begin—there's a letter for you."

He snatched it from my hands, and glared at the superscription. His whole manner changed on the instant—his better and brighter looks, the smile upon his lips, the laughing light in his eyes.

"Where did you get this?"

"It was given to me by Miss Freemantle."

"Damnation!" he vociferated.

He tore the letter open and read the lines it contained, his face darkening more and more. I could see his hands tremble as they clutched the paper, ere they tore it into a hundred pieces, and dropped them at his feet.

"Now—your message!"

I delivered it, adding, also, the cause that

had led Miss Freemantle to make me the bearer of her missive. He heard me patiently throughout, and then burst forth into a torrent of oaths and blasphemy, such as in all my life I never hope to hear again.

“Thirsk, Thirsk! is this madness?”

“Raving madness!” he cried; “leave me, ere I think of cutting your throat, and my own too. And yet I won’t give up, like a fool, for a word—I’ll—I’ll——” and he strode to his window and looked out.

“Where’s that damned dog, I wonder?”

He turned round on me.

“Haven’t you gone yet?”

“I thought you might have something more to say to me.”

“Do you want your five pounds?” he sneered.

“I can dispense with the amount for a week or two.”

“Then good night.”

And he almost slammed the door upon me.

* * * * *

Early the following morning Mr. Genny's new dog was lying dead under the parlour window. It had been poisoned in the night.

CHAPTER VI.

ON DEFENCE.

THERE was no small excitement at Folling-gay Farm on the following morning. The new defender of the house of Genny, lying dead in the path, was a sight that was unexpected and unprepared for; the farm-servants and dairy-maids flocked round, and made speculations concerning it, and thought the time was rapidly advancing when they would all be murdered in their precious beds.

To each of his subordinates Mr. Genny had said, "Do ye know anything aboot this?" and pointed with his whip to the prostrate beast, and even included his

farm-pupils and his niece in the general interrogatory.

“Perhaps it be only a matter of form, Mr. Neider,” said Genny, upon asking me, “but I’ll put the question to every living thing that can speak the Queen’s English. I shall be more cautious in my movements when there’s a liar about me that I can’t foind out.”

Mr Genny was in a towering passion, and I passed over the rudeness of his speech. That he did not suspect me was natural enough, but that he made a pretence of examining his whole staff to render the criticism of one gentleman in particular less prominent, was evidently his plan.

And that gentleman appeared in the morning, looking rather pale and haggard, but composed in demeanour, and quite his usual self. I was surprised to see him; I fancied that I had had my last conversation with him yesterday, and that his mind had

been made up to a secret and hasty departure from the Farm wherein he had learned so little, and perplexed so many.

"Good moorning, Mr. Thirsk," said Genny, as he came from the house; "do ye know anything of this, now? Ye're about the last one that's left to ask, sir."

"A dead dog? No, I don't know how he died, or where his soul's gone."

"I'm not anxious about his soul, Mr. Thirsk."

"I should be anxious about removing his body from the premises. It's an ugly sight on an empty stomach."

"Ye know nothing about this, then?"

"I know since daybreak that there has been an infernal hubbub under my window. But as to who killed him, I rest in perfect ignorance."

"Ye couldn't make a guess now?"

"I wouldn't be so uncharitable as to cast a suspicion on one who might be pure as the driven snow," responded Thirsk;

“ Still, there’s one question I should like to ask, in return for the many unfair ones—discourteous, I may say—with which you have favoured me.”

“ Ay, sir,” returned Genny.

“ Are you quite certain—could you take your Bible oath upon it—that this is not a case of—*felo de se*?”

And, laughing heartily at his own “catch,” Nicholas Thirsk left the farmer to mourn over the mortal remains of his last purchase, and to send after his mocking farm-pupil a curse, which was not so subdued but that that young gentleman might have possibly received it.

“ I loike a joke in season,” said Genny to me; “ but, darm it! when it’s out o’ season it’s loike a blight on the beans. And a darmed unseasonable two-faced fellow he be!” cried Genny; “ and whoever he may be who killed a beast that never harmed him, don’t let him wander o’ nights again; or I’ll riddle him with gun-shot.”

Later in the day I observed a difference in Harriet Genny. I was quick to detect a difference, and she was certainly more reserved and more irritable than usual. One of those strange petulant fits of temper appeared to have set in, and was the more apparent from its contrast with her fair moods of the preceding days. I could scarcely think the death of her uncle's dog had affected her so much.

"I fear I have been unfortunate enough to offend you again," I ventured to say on the first opportunity that presented itself.

"Do you think I am always taking offence like a child?"

"I think you are different this morning."

"Everything is different, sir—we honest farm-folk are becoming gradually enwrapped in a halo of mystery, and it is an oppressive atmosphere, that tries one's temper, perhaps. We did not know what mystery meant until Mr. Thirsk and you came amongst us."

"Why do you couple our names together, Miss Genny, as though we were both conspirators?"

"You cannot guess who killed my uncle's dog?"

"Oh! the dog again!" I cried, petulantly; "No."

"You do not believe Mr. Thirsk poisoned it?"

"I do not."

And I had not thought so for an instant. Had Mr. Thirsk attempted such a proceeding, he must have opened the window, or made some attempt to attract the dog's attention, and the barking of the animal would have followed on the instant.

"Mr. Neider, I hope you are not falling into the power of that man?" she said.

"I assure you it is not likely."

"You and he talked long and passionately last night in his room," she said; "had I cared to play the eavesdropper I might

have learned a story to throw a light upon this act."

"Miss Genny, you suspect me?" I cried indignantly.

"Your actions might be clearer—you have at least chosen for a friend a very reckless man—you are stepping into a snare, sir, and I warn you of him."

"You are wrong, believe me."

"I am beginning to discredit everyone," she said coldly; "where I have had faith, faith and all sank with me—where I have trusted most, I have found most cunning. I begin to doubt again my powers of discernment, now you who feign to be a 'mother's boy,' a youth not twenty-one yet, deceive me with an ingenuous air that proves how good an actor you can be."

I stood bewildered—this was so grave a charge, and from one whom I would have foster generous thoughts concerning me.

"Will you enlighten me further?"

I was answered by a sharp "No."

"To say no more is to leave me under the brand of a suspicion which I have no power to refute. I have a right to defend myself, at least."

"I don't require a defence."

"But you have accused me, and have even judged me in your own mind dishonourable. Do you think I will live in this house under so cruel a stigma?"

"Don't make such a shouting, Mr. Neider!" she said irritably.

"I wish to defend myself—and I will!"

"There, I will take *your* word that there is no plan hatching to blow up Follingay Farm—will that content you?"

"Nothing will content me but a fair statement of your suspicions."

"There is no occasion for explanation."

She appeared vexed that she had been drawn so far into discussion with me, or that she had said so much. She attempted a light vein, and even smiled once more, but I remained obdurate. She hesitated still,

and I fancied spoke at last with a heightened colour.

"I spoke of mystery, Mr. Neider," said she—"of a strangeness in your actions, that, at least to me, appears new to your character. And yet, after all, there is not much mystery in two young men quarrelling, or in one young man, who shall be nameless, meeting a lady in the high roads after dusk. Young men quarrel and fall in love, and keep their tongues wisely silent on the matter—your youth only misled me a little."

"Why do you harp upon my youth so much?"

"More questions?" she said, with a forced laugh; "when will it please you to make this court of inquisition a trifle less severe?"

"Miss Genny, I am on my defence—I forgot it for the moment."

"Do forget it altogether, and not stand before the door there, as if you were a thief-taker."

"And my defence is," I continued, not heeding her remark, "that I did not quarrel with Mr. Thirsk, and that my accidental meeting with a lady——"

"Oh! I don't want to hear anything about your ladies," she said, and made a hasty dash past me before I could stop her.

Still my defence was a lame one, and perhaps it was better that she was disinclined to ask too many questions. I might have betrayed too much of Nicholas Thirsk's movements, which would have been unfair to him, as they did not concern Follingay folk, and had only, up to the present time, involved the death of a Follingay dog. I was very glad to have turned the tables somewhat upon her — some day hence I might relate the whole story, and clear away a little more of that oppressive atmosphere against which she had entered her energetic protest.

That I had cleared the atmosphere uncongenial to me, which had threatened to in-

crease in density between us, was at least satisfactory; and the manner of Harriet Genny was once more the new manner of two days ago—nothing new or strange to anyone save me, and only to me a different inflexion in her voice, a less cold look upon the face that seemed ever shadowed by the past or future.—*Which?*

CHAPTER VII.

PLACE - SEEKING.

LATE that evening three visitors arrived at the Farm. We were in full force in the Farm parlour, diversely occupied at the time. Mr. Genny was somewhat ostentatiously cleaning and oiling a favourite fowling-piece, which generally hung over his bed-room mantel-shelf—a gun with which I had more than once seen him shoot Sir Richard Freemantle's pheasants, when they intruded on his land, and there was no one by to see them afterwards disappear in his capacious pockets; Mr. Thirsk was making entries in a note-book; Edmund Grey was spelling over

a country paper ; Harriet was knitting by the fireside ; and I was attempting a second letter, less glowingly mendacious, to my mother at home.

Those visitors separated in the passage outside — one remaining quietly with his back against the street door, and the two being shown in by a dairy-maid off duty. The unobtrusive individual was Mr. Ricksworth, and the more apparent visitors were Mrs. Ricksworth and her daughter Mercy.

“Who be that in the passage?” said Genny, sharply.

“My father, uncle.”

“Let him coom in then, with the rest of ye.”

“He thought you mightn’t like to see him, Matthew,” said Mrs. Ricksworth, “after what happened once here.”

“After what happened fifty toimes here,” corrected her brother ; “tell him to coom in—I don’t loike people I can’t trust in my passages.”

"You're hard, Matthew—but no harder than he deserves, though I say it that shouldn't," said Mrs. Ricksworth; "Mercy, tell your father to come in."

Mr. Ricksworth, with a somewhat sheepish air, and with a sidelong walk, came into the room, thus adjured, and with a humble "good evening," addressed to the general company, deposited himself on a third chair, by the side of his daughter. With the exception of Mr. Grey, who crumpled up the newspaper and thrust it behind him on the hard sofa, the rest of us continued our respective employments.

They were a strange trio, sitting a little apart from the general company—one could scarcely imagine them representatives of the same family. Mercy Ricksworth sat between her father and mother, well and brightly dressed, with her handsome face a shade more pale than usual, and her hands inclined to little restless movements in her lap; her mother sat stiff and angu-

lar on her chair, very upright in form, and inexpressibly grim — a white-faced, sour-tempered looking woman, with a nose more hooked than her brother's. Years ago it had been a happier-looking face, but time and a bad husband, and a child to support for twelve years, had rendered it inflexible. Hers had been an uphill life, and she carried the wear and tear of the journey on her countenance. Her liege lord and husband, almost as thin as his wife, but more than a head and shoulders taller—and she was a tall woman—lounged back in his chair, with his hands in his pockets, his long legs thrust out to their fullest extent, and his swarthy hirsute face wearing not quite so devil-may-care an expression as usual—a fact accounted for by his being not quite so drunk.

“Well, what's the matter?” said Genny, after the pause that succeeded their entrance had lasted a little too long.

"It's bad news that has brought us here, Matthew," said his sister.

"Ay—there's small doubt of that, I take it."

"Our life's bad news, thanks to *him*," with a glance at her husband; "and, though I say it that shouldn't, it'll never be any better till I tuck him up in his coffin."

"Go it, mum," muttered Ricksworth, ironically.

"And so, as he's made his bed, and must lie on it, I haven't come, Matthew, to ask a favour for the likes on him. I've seen the end of all my preaching long ago."

"I ain't," was Ricksworth's sententious comment.

"Well, well, well—what is it?" cried the farmer.

"You might give me time, Matthew," said his sister, in an aggrieved tone; "I don't often trouble you by coming here—we ain't respectable people, and you've got on in the world, and hold your head high, and keep

a banker in the county town. Ay!" she said, with her brother's intonation of that useful interjection, "you're a great man!"

Mr. Genny grunted.

"And you're my flesh and blood, too; and though you don't think of the likes of us much, yet we've a little claim on you. Those who haven't forfeited it, at least."

She looked at her husband, who winced and inspected the ceiling.

"I don't even have the washing," muttered Mrs. Ricksworth.

"Haven't I enough hands to wash at home?" retorted her brother; "did you ever know me fling my mooney in the streets?"

"I can't say that I have."

Mercy broke in at this place.

"Mother, I had better explain the reasons that have brought us here."

"Ay—do," said her uncle.

"Shall I?" she asked her mother.

"You've been brought up different like, and the Hall folk paid for your schooling

when my own husband had drunk the money away that was put by for it—I say it that shouldn't; but he deserves it—” she added, by way of parenthesis; and then went on again, “and so tell your uncle why we've come here. P'raps I am a little tedious and disagreeable, now we don't live under the same roof, Matthew, and there's a couple of tombstones in the churchyard of Welsdon that tell of two who loved us alike.”

“Ay—ay,” said Genny, in a softened tone; “go on, Mercy.”

“It's a very simple matter, uncle,” began Mercy, thus adjured, “I could have better performed my task alone, I think.”

“Ay!” was the hearty response.

“But mother thought she might have some influence with you, and I wished my father to come.”

“Thankee,” muttered Genny.

“He is rather unsettled just now, and we didn't wish to leave him at home.”

“He'd have taken something out of the

house, and sold it," remarked Mrs. Ricksworth.

Ricksworth continued looking at the ceiling. Nothing seemed to affect his nerves, or cover him with shame. He had been railed against so long, from the outer world as well as in that family circle of which he was not a distinguished ornament, that his case-hardened front turned off such little pellets as fell upon him then. Besides which, Mrs. Ricksworth was quite correct in her remarks, and in sober moments he never demurred to the truth.

Mercy coloured, however, at her mother's remark, and cast a hasty glance towards her; but Mrs. Ricksworth was taking snuff from a round rosewood box at that moment, and missed the signs of her daughter's indignation.

"It's a very short story, uncle—I have left the Freemantles' service."

"Ay!—how's that?" and Mr. Genny paused, with a camel's hair-pencil full of oil, and stared at his niece.

"Sir Richard Freemantle gave me notice to leave him last night."

"A month's notice, or a month's wages, I suppose," said Genny, with an eye to business.

"A month's wages."

"Sharp work," said Genny; "and what brought about such a sudden change at the Hall?"

Mercy's face flushed, but she remained silent. The farmer repeated his question.

"It can't matter—it's a long story, and I'm not much to blame in it."

"Ye're not obliged to confess your shortcomings, certainly," said Genny; "but to your own uncle there moight be a little straightforwardness, I reckon."

"There's a big heap of chaps here," suddenly commented Ricksworth.

"Ay!—I had forgotten. Some other time, then——"

"Mercy's a girl who takes after her own father in the matter of stubbornness," re-

marked Mrs. Ricksworth ; " I know about as much as you do."

" Devil take your babbling!" blurted forth Ricksworth, with a demoniac cast of countenance ; " can't you do anything else but foul your own nest, you old magpie!"

" Hollo, here!" cried Genny, " we don't have anything of this sort here, ye know. Drop it—or go!"

" I'll drop my sledge-hammer first on her ugly jaws in a minute!" continued the unpacified Ricksworth.

" You may if you like," said Mrs. Ricksworth, in her usual calm tones ; " it won't be the first time that I have felt the weight of your fist, though I say it that shouldn't."

" Ricksworth, if ye say another word, ye'll go out in the yard, my man," said Genny, with a menacing look.

" All right, guv'nor—it's only my play."

And this playful ruffian cocked his eyes at the ceiling once more.

" I say it's a story that I'm not much to

blame in," Mercy continued; "I hope you'll take me at my word. I am not in the habit of telling falsehoods."

"Ay!"

"The winter's coming on, and mother's lost two of her best customers, and I—I haven't saved a great deal of money in service, and don't care to be an idler on their hands. I come to you, first, uncle—I would rather not leave Welsdon just yet, and mother hopes there is a vacancy for me at the Farm here."

Genny shook his head slowly to and fro.

"We're overpressed with hands just now."

"What did I say?" said Mercy, turning upon her mother.

"He don't say 'No' yet, Mercy."

"Well, it depends now," said Genny; "I don't say 'No' because ye're my sister's daughter, and ye've been a good girl enough, if a trifle too hot and independent now and then. Will ye come into the best parlour for a moment, with Harriet or me?"

She looked from Harriet to her uncle, and then said, "What for?"

"I'm a strict man, and keep to rules. The reason why ye left the Freemantle's?"

She shook her head.

"Then I've no place for ye," said Genny, remorselessly; "unless——"

"Unless?" repeated Mercy.

"Unless I may go to Sir Richard for your character."

"Miss Freemantle will give me a character," said Mercy.

"She didn't take ye. Ye were Sir Richard's servant, lass."

"Mother, shall we come home now?" asked Mercy.

"I will go to Sir Richard in the morning," said Genny.

"If you dare!" cried Mercy, starting to her feet.

"Ay! — I dare!" was the quiet response.

"You will have your trouble for nothing,

then—Sir Richard left for London with his sister this morning !”

Thirsk dropped his note-book, picked it up again, and recommenced his numerous entries.

“I’ll write to him,” said Genny; “the first time I meet him, girl, I’ll ask his meaning—mark me !”

“He will tell you nothing—he has given me his word.”

“He will give ye a character. He must say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’”

“He will say ‘No,’” cried Mercy, thus driven to bay; “he will refuse all explanation, and decline alluding to me. That’s all—now, let us go home, mother—I knew how little any one here cared for our distress.”

“Mercy,” reproved Harriet, in a low tone.

“You might help me if you could,” said she, more gently; “but your hands are tied, and I come first to my own kin. Do you

know what worry, and driving, and pain it cost me to come here at all ? ”

“ You are agitated, Mercy,” said her cousin ; “ you are not speaking calmly.”

“ You are a favourite niece,” taunted Mercy ; “ you are all that is good, and amiable, and kind ; I am a poor girl, who requires a character for even the place of drudge in my uncle’s house.”

“ Matthew, you’re a hard man,” said his sister, rising and tying her bonnet-strings with two sudden jerks ; “ I did think better of you, but it’s ill-thinking what’s in *your* brains, though I say it that shouldn’t. I wish now I hadn’t asked the girl to come here—but it’s hard times at home, and—‘needs must’——”

“ ‘ When the devil drives,’ ” added her uncomplimentary husband.

“ Get up with you ! ” snapped Mrs. R.

“ I am not afraid of the chance of earning my own living. I shall go to London,” said Mercy.

"Alone?" asked her uncle.

"Yes."

"Coom to me before ye go—I shall want to speak to you."

Mercy gave an impatient shake of her head.

"Not about this business—say that's on the shelf, lass."

"I will never enter your doors again," cried the impetuous girl.

"Then go your own way," said Genny, losing patience. "I wish ye well, but ye take after your father, and brazen matters out a little too boldly, girl. I don't say I woan't take ye here, or help ye anywhere else—but if ye coom here without a character, and choke - full of mystery, I wouldn't have ye in my house if ye were twice my niece. Darm my eyes, I have had enough of mystery lately, without your play-acting nonsense!"

"Why, can't you tell your uncle, you obstinate girl?" said her mother; "a drunken

husband and a stubborn child—though I say it that shouldn't—the Lord support me in the midst of all this bluster !”

“Now, old woman, come out,” said Ricksworth.

“Hold your blating, sottish tongue—it's never still !” said his wife.

“I'm going to let it run just a minute, for your edification, farmer,” said Ricksworth, in a louder voice.

He had risen, and his darkling looks were fixed upon his brother-in-law's countenance.

“You're a man up in the stirrups, and so coxy. You're a flinty fellow, who turned me away for a trumpery mistake in a sixpence, and so particular—but keep your coxiness and your particulariness to these young slaves here who are under your thumb. You may bully everybody but *her*,” with a jerk of his elbow in his daughter's direction ; “she's trod on too much now, and she's a good girl—the only one

who ever gave a good word to a poor devil of a father who's been a trifle loosish. Keep, my friend, a civil tongue in your head as respects her—or, damme! you may come to grief!”

“Leave my house!” roared Genny.

“And damn your house!—and may its roof fall on your head some day, you scaly vagabond, whose own flesh and blood haven't weight with you—whose——”

His daughter's arm stole through his, and drew him towards the door, and her voice was heard beseeching him to be still.

“Well, well, my girl, but he did rile me,” I heard him mutter, and he went from the room without another word, his grim-visaged better half bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLACE-LEAVING.

"THIS might have been all talked over in a more fitting place," growled Genny, when they had departed, and he was looking daggers at Harriet, as though it had been her fault that the meeting had occurred.

"They were asked in here," replied Harriet.

"Ay! but who had thought of their blazing out their business before all these," said he, petulantly; "my Gosh! but this has been a day of sixes and sevens!"

And the stock of his gun came with a clash to the floor.

"Better luck to-morrow," observed Thirsk.

Mr. Genny grunted. The name of Nicholas Thirsk was not registered very legibly in his good books just then.

"To-morrow we die, though," said a practical gent, who took time by the forelock, and was wise enough to have only faith in the present," added Thirsk.

"Ay!—and to-day we die sometimes."

"Especially dogs."

"Ay!" and Genny's eyes flashed fire. Dogs were a sore point just then with the farmer.

"Dogs have their day, though, as well as men—and farmers."

"What do ye mean by that?" said Genny.

"The meaning is plain enough to a common understanding."

Mr. Genny's hand came with a thump on the table. He had received so many shafts that day, that the last one carried away his

self-command, and with no respect for time or place he poured forth the vial of his wrath.

“Measter Thirsk, I’ve had enough of ye. I’m toired of your darmed gentlemanly sneers, in my own house, where I’ve been incloined to think myself master. Ye’ve been a laggard, that’s never been worth his salt, and your staying here does no good to me, and much harm to yourself. Ye killed my dog last night, or had a hand in it somehow—ye ain’t here, in this house, with a fair object, and there’s something wrong, and false, and un-English about ye. And your toime’s soon up now, and thank God A’mighty for it, say I !”

And bang came the brown fist on the table again.

Mr. Thirsk shut up his pocket-book, and returned it to his breast-pocket. He was cool and collected in the midst of all this vituperation, and there was a mocking curl

of his lip, that did not tend to soothe Mr. Genny.

"Steady, Mr. Genny—a rush of blood to the head at your time of life might be serious."

"You heard what I said, sir."

"I have heard," said he, rising; "and why didn't you say it before? Where was the good of bottling up your indignation, as you bottled up my forty pounds, till the former rushed out in a lump, and made a brute of you. If you had only said it before, I would have wished you joy of my *douceur*, and shaken the dust of your butter-smelling den from my feet."

"I say it noo!"

"Then I will leave you now. Within one hour, Mr. Genny, I shall have great pleasure in taking my departure."

"When ye loike, sir," muttered Genny, who was, however, taken a little aback by Thirsk's prompt acquiescence with his wishes.

"I will see to my luggage—I beg pardon, my carpet-bag," said he; "and then fare-well to you all."

And Nicholas Thirsk walked briskly upstairs.

"Gie me the red book—gie me the red book," spluttered Mr. Genny, "if he goes to-night, I maun gie him the balance between this and the middle of October—and darmed glad to gie it him too. Mr. Grey, will you reach——"

But Mr. Grey had disappeared also—how long a time he had stolen from the room, it was impossible to say.

"Why, where's *he* gone, now—tra-passing?"

"I think he left soon after Mercy, uncle," said Harriet, "he has been absent some time."

"Ay—but he's a good lad, and one needn't be troubled long about him. Harriet, have ye seen my red book?"

Harriet had not seen it, but proceeded to

look for it on a side table, amongst a pile of old books, beside the tea-tray. Presently the volume was in Farmer Genny's hands.

Putting on his spectacles, Matthew Genny proceeded to study Mr. Thirsk's account, muttering over it, and drawing in his breath.

"Forty poonds spread over thirteen weeks, is three poonds one and saxpence ha'penny a week, or nearlyso," said he, "and he's four weeks short, and that makes twelve poonds, sax and tuppence owing. Harriet, have ye a tuppence handy?"

The account was gone through to his satisfaction, and the little pile of money being placed at his elbow, he put his gun aside, and leaned back in his chair.

"It'll be a moighty relief to have him gone," said Genny, "but it's the first ill parting I've ever had with a pupil of moine. It riles me a little to think that—but if he'd stayed longer, I moight have shot him by

mistake one dark noight, and been tried for manslaughter."

"He's a sly fellow."

The sly fellow re-entered the room, bearing his carpet-bag with him.

"Neider," said he, boldly addressing me, as he came in, "shall I pay you your five pounds now?"

"As you please."

"It will leave me with about six and tenpence in the world."

"Then defer the payment *sine die*."

"There's a small amount due to ye, young man," said Genny, pointing to the money on the table.

"Keep it to buy another dog with."

"Ay! then, you did kill it?"

"I did not," responded Thirsk.

"Then take your money, sir."

Thirsk caught up the money in his hand, and walked towards the fire.

At the same moment one of the maids came into the room, to ask a question of

Miss Genny; Thirsk's hand, that had hovered over the flames, paused.

"Here, Patty, said he, walking towards her, "I am going away, and here's something for you girls to buy caps with—remember me in your prayers, my darlings!"

He dropped the handful of gold and silver into her open palm, and left her wide-mouthed and speechless.

"Miss Genny, I'll wish you good-bye. When I shook hands, last night, I meant good-bye, but fate was against me. So I mean it now in sober earnest."

"Good-bye, sir. I am sorry," she added, "that any ill-feeling has arisen to part you and my uncle."

"Will you bestow one wish for my future prosperity?"

"I will wish it, sir," said she; "but if you carry the same rashness, I may say the same recklessness, into the world with you, my wishes go for nothing."

"Still they are well-meant, and I thank you," said he.

There was the courtesy of a gentleman in his answer. I had not seen him before acting so graceful a part.

"Let me wish you in return," he said, after shaking hands, "a good husband, and a fairer fortune—I will say a brighter life—than you have experienced hitherto. Let me warn you also."

"Warn me?"

"Put not your trust in—authors."

Harriet started and crimsoned, and turned hastily away, and Mr. Thirsk looked towards me.

"Neider, I would ask you to help me to carry my carpet-bag to the station, but you look wearied."

"I intend to see you off," I said.

"Thanks, honest Pythias," he said; "it is pleasant to meet a friend in the midst of adversity—and the bag is heavy! Mr. Genny, good-bye to you."

"I'll shake hands, if ye loike," said Genny, after a pause, and in a low voice; "ye're leaving my home, and ye've been one in it over three months. I've spoken my moind and have done with it, and I should loike to part friends."

"Are the angry waves stilled, sir?"

"Ay."

Thirsk hesitated.

"Well, why should I bear *you* malice?—your house has been of infinite service to me, and your hot words did not affect me much. There's my hand to the bargain that we sink bygones for ever."

He shook hands with Matthew Genny, and turned towards the door.

"Good luck to Follingay Farm," he said, as he passed into the farm-yard, followed by myself; "I found a friend there, at least."

He passed his arm through mine as we closed the wicket behind us.

"Don't you believe me?" he added.

CHAPTER IX.

THIRSK BIDS ME FAREWELL.

· WHEN we were quit of the Farm, Nicholas Thirsk's first observation startled me a little.

“Are you going to Tramlingford races next week, Neider?”

“That's an odd question—why do you ask?”

“Because I shall most likely attend that aristocratic reunion.”

“You?”

“I am a lover of the turf; a betting man—a taker of odds against the favourite, or the field.”

"You keep your tastes in the dark, then, Thirsk."

"Like my friends—eh?"

"Your friends have no right to pry too closely into the inner machinery."

"Which is complex, and might have a friend's head off—rewarding undue curiosity by unceremoniously cutting him short," he added. "Here, catch hold of the carpet-bag—you've the muscles of a navvy."

I relieved guard with his bag, and he looked me full in the face as we walked on arm-in-arm.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" I responded.

He laughed.

"This is a change over the spirit of my dream," he said.

"I am sorry Mr. Genny was so hasty," I remarked.

"I am very glad. I was anxious to reach London to-night."

"Ah!—I see."

"And Mr. Genny offered me a valid excuse. Who could care to sit and be insulted, *mon ami*, when the world lies open before him?"

"You played your part well—but I am sorry it was only a part."

"It shows you what a schemer I am. So be it, Neider—I *am* a schemer!"

"A sad avowal enough."

"I have been the last four months scheming for a wife—lo! the secret escapes me in the hour when my heart is full!"

"Are you in jest or earnest, Thirsk?"

"Sober earnest," he returned; "I am in a loquacious mood, and inclined to take you into my confidence. I promised it long ago—why should I not keep my word? You have been tried and not found wanting—upon my soul, you *are* the best friend I have!"

"Thank you."

"And the only one—there, I own it!"

"Haven't I a right to your friendship," I said; "didn't I buy it for five pounds?"

"Your mocking vein sits upon you like a cloak—that's a bad fit," he added, "and so have done with it. I was brought up without a mother to love me, and with a sharp-tongued satirical father to sneer down a child's ingenuousness, and crush out, when I was a man, every idea that was not worldly and mean. And so I put forth evil fruit! But you kept your boy's heart until now, and are to be envied."

There was a touch of sadness in his voice, that convinced me there was no irony in his words—if the stem had been grafted aright, I thought, this might have been a noble tree.

"I am going to show you a glimpse of the past. In the first place, believe me an unforgiving man."

"You haven't sustained your character well to-night."

"I was but stung by a gnat, minor

troubles are nothing to me," he answered, carelessly; "give me a great injury, and I will nurse it on my death-bed. Sir Richard Freemantle injured me in the youthful days to which I have alluded."

"In what manner?"

"He was a younger man then, by four or five years—a cold-hearted frog of a fellow, and guardian to his half-sister Agatha."

"Miss Freemantle?"

"The same. He was a friend of my father's: they were, possibly are, both members of some dusty, moth-eaten institution, where dead men's bones, and dead men's obsolete handicrafts, are the chief objects of worship. He had a brother then, who was my friend—and that brother and I were at an age to laugh at their antiquarian researches, and left to ourselves to seek a gayer world beyond them. Sir Richard thinks to this day that I led his brother into temptation; but his brother was a greater hypocrite than myself, and—led

me ! Sir Richard exerted his authority, but we took no heed—we were youths of twenty, with the world before us, and no mothers to pray for our better lives. He was more daring than I—and he broke up and died. By that time Sir Richard had poisoned my father's mind against me——”

“Are you sure?”

“I judge by the result,” said Thirsk. “My father lectured and preached, and sneered and cursed, and finally—drove me adrift!”

He set his teeth, and shook his clenched hand in the air.

“I went to Paris after that, and at Paris I met accidentally Sir Richard's half-sister Agatha. She was completing her education, and the husband of her *gouvernante* was friend No. 2 of mine. Do you guess the rest now?”

“You fell in love with her?”

“Yes—and she was an heiress.”

The words were strangely coupled together. In his final remark it sounded like a reason for his love.

"And she was a girl of seventeen, of a romantic turn of mind, and so fell in love with me. And the old, old story went on for a year and a half; and then, like a vulture, there swooped down on our wooing the half-brother and parted us."

"And how did she bear the parting?"

"Why, she was a girl who loved me; she had read many novels, where the guardian is always the evil genius, and the lover, the best and most exemplary of mortals. And she held fast to her plighted troth, and will hold fast to the end—the bright end, wherein I shall overreach her cautious brother, and become a rich man by one stroke."

"You will wait for her coming of age?"
I said.

"I will wait a week or two—no longer. She will not be of age for two years."

"And this accounts for your stay at the farm?"

"A profitable stay, that might have

ended more satisfactorily, if Sir Richard had not suddenly detected our correspondence, and discharged our faithful go-between."

"Mercy Ricksworth?"

"The same fair damsel; a brave girl, who would have gone through fire and water for her mistress, as her mistress would go through fire and water for a gentleman of my intimate acquaintance."

"And the flittings out of the window?"

"Don't be shocked—it wasn't to meet the lady of my love, but to hide my love-letters at the back of an old sun-dial on Sir Richard's lawn, or in the ruins of 'my Lady's Chamber' up at the castle. Still, when the hour was early, and there was a chance—thanks to Mercy Ricksworth!—we met once or twice and renewed our vows, and promised to be faithful unto death—just like Romeo and Juliet in the balcony scene. Last night we were to have started for the Scottish border. You know the rest."

“And Genny’s dog?”

“Did not die by my hand, although it was conveniently put out of my way by—but I won’t tell you everything. You are so gloomy over my recital, that I begin to repent my confidence.”

“I do not see the end of the story.”

“Two happy lovers united in the holy bonds of matrimony—I swear it!”

“And you really love Miss Freemantle?”

“Do you doubt it?”

“You hate her brother, you say,” I said doubtfully.

“If I live a hundred years, I shall hate him!”

“When you have married Miss Freemantle——”

“His shadow shall not mar my rejoicings,” said Thirsk; “he and I will be for ever apart.”

There was a long silence between us; we had passed through the village of Welsdon, and were making rapid progress to the railway station before he spoke again.

"So my friends some day will all come back, and you must be in their midst to support me. I will look my creditors in the face, and live the life of the blessed! Is not this 'a bold stroke for a wife?'"

"You appear to me to think more of the riches in store than the wife that awaits you. I hope I am wrong."

"To be sure," he replied carelessly; "do you think, in all marriages for money, there are no romance and poetry? I tell you I shall be a happy fellow."

"The money may be tied up in some way."

"Only till she is one-and-twenty—then no hand can stay it. And there are fifty ways of getting money in advance from the crafty tribe of Judah, or even one's respectable solicitor. Is that the station light across the field?"

"Yes."

"How time flies in decent society! You will not forget Tramlingford race-

course, on the *second* day of the race."

"You will meet me there?"

"Or write to you before that day. If I write not, look out for me."

"What will bring you back to this part of the world?"

"Oh! let me have a little mystery—I shall have much to tell you then. And now, Alfred Neider, let me give you a warning as well as Genny's niece. Take care of love in a farm-house."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a fancy that you are drifting, *nolens volens*, in a certain direction, where there are quicksands and sunken rocks, and everything in the way of fair sailing!"

"Speak plainer, man," said I impatiently.

"I daren't, without betraying the confidence of friend No. 2."

"I thought you had only one friend in the world."

"Only one worth the name, certainly. Let me have a turn at the bag."

"It's all right—I'm not tired."

"What powers of endurance you have! I wish I had your strong arm and broad chest."

"Aren't you strong enough?"

"Shaky at times—nothing to boast of. Here's the station."

We entered the station, where there was a bustle of preparation amongst two guards, a loutish boy in fustian, and three or four passengers.

"Guard!" Thirsk cried, in a loud voice—"see to my luggage."

"Yes, sir."

And the guard took the shabby carpet-bag in some surprise, and tried to make out his visitor from under the peak of his cap.

"Only one pigeon-hole, guard?—I suppose I can get a third-class ticket to London thereat."

"Ye-es, sir."

And the guard looked at him again, and

cursed him under his breath for his impudence.

“How nicely I calculated the time for lighting old Genny’s powder-magazine!” he said, returning with the ticket in his hand; “the train’s due in two minutes.”

We went out on the dark platform and waited for the train—Thirsk speaking ever of the bright future in store for him. He was in high spirits—the farming profession had evidently been a weight upon his soul. He was young, too—only five-and-twenty—and youth is sanguine, and builds castles, and peoples them with phantoms.

With a roar and rush came the hissing engine and its train to the little country station, which he had sought four months ago on the same day as myself. His hopes were high then, and mine had not been born!

The doors opened and slammed, the few passengers bound Londonwards changed positions with two labouring men and a

lame woman, the whistle sounded shrilly in the night air, the train moved on its dark way.

“Remember Tramlingford!” cried Thirsk.

“All right! My best wishes for your real prosperity, Thirsk.”

“Same to you whatever it may mean. And beware of love in a farm-house.”

A hasty grip of the hand, a short laugh, and Thirsk was borne on his way, with perhaps fifty schemers like him.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





